THE AZTEC TRIPLE ALLIANCE

The Complete Study · A landscape and twelve modules on ninety-three years in which an armed group on an island ruled several million people without a garrison, a school, a statute or a citizenship, and was destroyed in two years by the men who had been paying it

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with Claude (Anthropic) · 2026

held as tested, not revealed

PREFACE AND OUTLINE

Front matter · how this study was made, the disciplines it holds itself to, and a map of its thirteen parts

This is a case study in the Patterns of Power series, applying the series' framework to the Aztec Triple Alliance, from the destruction of Azcapotzalco in 1428 to the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521 and the accounting that followed it. The framework is a lens for reading how any order of power is founded, dressed and held: the floor of force beneath every order, the robe of doctrine laid over the floor, the settlement that divides the spoils, the cost column in which each subject prices defection, the default by which an elite coordinates without instruction, and — running through all of it — position-logic, the proposition that rulers in like positions converge on like solutions because a position poses a problem with only a few good answers.

The collection was built European-colonial, and its recurring claim has been that the dynamics it describes are neither European nor colonial. That claim can be asserted indefinitely and demonstrated only once, and this case was chosen to demonstrate it. The Triple Alliance is the furthest thing from a European colonial order that still possesses a real documentary record. It had no wheel in use, no draught animals, no iron, no alphabet and no coinage. It had no contact of any kind with the Old World, and therefore no access to the menu of arrangements from which the collection's other subjects were all, in one way or another, selecting. Whatever the Mexica did that the framework's other cases also did, they arrived at separately.

The study was built the way the series is built, one module at a time. The author brought the framework, the direction and the judgement of the whole, and held the collaboration to its disciplines; Claude, Anthropic's model, did the research — verifying every load-bearing quotation, date and figure by search against a source reproducing the primary text before any module was written — and produced the drafts, each presented and confirmed before the next was begun. The framework's concepts are the series'; the Mexica application, and the refinements it yielded, are the work of the collaboration.

Where the method had to bend

The series' engine is the method of information asymmetry: the exact public words set beside the exact words of the ground, the arithmetic laid out and the sum left to the reader. In the colonial studies the gap runs across water, between what the metropole was told and what the conquered lived, and the order's central task is keeping the two ends apart.

Tenochtitlan had no metropole. The men who voted the war fought it; the capital sat inside the country it ruled; and the violence a European empire would have concealed was, here, deliberately shown — foreign rulers were brought in secret to watch the sacrifices and sent home to describe them. So the gap had to be looked for elsewhere, and it was found in three places. It runs between what the Mexica said the wars were for and what their own counsellors said, in the same century and in the same language: a ruler telling a Spaniard that Tlaxcala was preserved so that young men would have somewhere near at hand to train, and Tlacaelel proposing cruel war for vassalage, rents and markets close by where slaves and gold and feathers could be bought. It runs between the doctrine that the sun required the noblest blood and a Nahua annalist's flat sentence that when nobles were captured on either side they were released and the commoners were the only ones who died. And it runs, most usefully of all, between what the order said about itself and what the archaeology says: a promotion ladder denominated in captives, and six hundred crania from one skull rack, among them women and children.

The disciplines

Five rules govern every module.

Quotation. Public-domain primary sources — codices, chronicles, legal material, the speeches preserved in the sixteenth-century compilations — are quoted exactly, in Nahuatl or Spanish with translation, at the length the argument needs, because in a legal fiction the precise wording is the evidence. Modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased, briefly, and credited.

No fabrication. No quotation, date, attribution or figure is ever invented or reconstructed from memory. What cannot be verified is dropped or flagged, never guessed; contested figures are given as ranges. This discipline bites unusually hard here. Almost every written source for the Mexica postdates their destruction: the codices were compiled by friars from indigenous testimony a generation after the conquest, the chronicles by Nahua and mestizo authors negotiating a position under Spanish rule, and Durán, Alvarado Tezozómoc and the *Codex Ramírez* descend from a common lost

original and cannot corroborate one another. The reign dates differ between every major chronicle. Where a module depends on a figure, the figure is given as the range the sources support, and the ranges are sometimes an order of magnitude wide.

Gravity without partisanship. Suffering is held with gravity, and the study refuses both flattery and demonisation — it names the legal fiction as fiction and explains the order's logic without excusing it. Its recurring watchword is *legibility is not pardon*: to understand how a thing was done is not to forgive its being done.

Contribution. Every module returns a refinement to the framework, stated plainly in its closing section, rather than merely applying the framework to the case.

Held as tested, not revealed. The pattern is treated as something discovered and tested against the evidence, not handed down as doctrine — a lens laid over the record, a tendency and never a law. The final module states the strongest case against the study's own method and concedes what has to be conceded.

What the Mexica added to the framework

Because this order conquered without occupying, and because it possessed none of the instruments the collection's other conquerors reached for, it exposed by their absence several features the colonial cases obscure — and one absence ran under all of them.

The Triple Alliance never invented a membership category. There was *Mexica*, which was a birth; there were allies, which were cities; and there were tributaries, which were schedules. No third thing existed, and no status of any kind could be acquired by a conquered man. From that root the study drew most of its refinements: that where an order conquers without occupying, spectacular violence is the substitute for the garrison and its scale measures the garrison's absence, so that broadcast is the tell of an order with no garrison as surveillance is the tell of a belief that never took; that an order which imports its subjects' gods rather than exporting its own has concluded that their conviction is unnecessary; that formation for subjects is a readout of whether a membership category exists, and where none was minted the order is permanently barred from the cheap pole; that a settlement made where there is no legislature is lodged in a remembered pact rather than a statute, and presents itself as a memory, which has no clause to repeal; that collective assessment converts the state's enforcement problem into a neighbour's and buys revenue without building any relation at all; that where the levy falls on a manufactured good its incidence falls on whoever manufactures, which sorts extraction by sex as well as by caste; that an order ruling without administering will have commercial intelligence, exact on goods and routes and blind to disaffection; that a default built on kinship has a radius, and the

radius is the reach of a marriage network; that a concession lasts as long as the conceding power cannot internalise the function it is attached to, and outlives its regime only if it exists in a form a stranger can read; that a conquering elite need not be stronger than the order it destroys but only outside the coordination failure that order's floor exists to maintain; and that a metabolic note is called not by a conquest's violence but by the removal of the coordination the conquest destroys.

Set beside the Roman Republic — an order that shared no menu, no contact and no common ancestor with this one — the two proved to have the same characteristic move and opposite outcomes, and the comparison yielded the study's last findings: that an order with no membership category cannot be deprived into widening, because the mechanism by which cornered elites deal people in requires a concession that cannot be taken back; that where an order declines to build an instrument, the decisive question is who is physically present to fill the gap, which is often settled by transport rather than policy; and that formation is downstream of membership rather than the reverse.

The arc

A landscape opening and twelve modules, each with a framework function and its own evocative title.

Landscape — the two orders on the eve. *The Word for Craftsman.* A lake-country of small states whose ruling order was itself a former conquest naturalised until a dead empire's name had become the ordinary word for a skilled man, and the latecomers who arrived owning no share of it, hired their spears to the power that did, and took its chair when the succession broke.

1 — The Floor of Force. *The Army That Went Home.* An order that conquered without garrisoning, disarmed nobody, and sent its soldiers back to their fields, so that the atrocity was not an excess laid over the conquest but the price of having no occupation.

2 — The Settlement. *People of Little Worth.* No statute, no register and no court: a founding division performed by a remembered bargain in which the losers were made to speak first, and the men who fought the war were told they had agreed in advance to receive nothing.

3 — The Robe. *The Same Height as the Rain.* A parvenu god set on one platform beside the rain everybody had always needed; a debt owed to the sun, broadcast at enormous expense to one city and never once offered to the millions it ruled; and the sacrament sorted by caste.

4 — Formation. *The Cord Buried on a Battlefield.* The most complete formation apparatus of the pre-modern world, beginning at the cutting of the umbilical cord —

and not one hour of it offered to the conquered, for a reason sharper than unwillingness.

5 — The Cost Column. *Four Hundred Cobs of Maize.* Why the ordinary person complied, worked out separately for three populations facing three different ledgers; and what the price of a daughter was in the fourth year of the famine.

6 — Extraction. *The Light Spindle and the Heavy.* A tax collected in cloth, which was money, on a schedule dictated by the weight a man could carry — resting on the labour of women spinning a fibre their own households were forbidden to wear.

7 — Information and Suppression. *We Seem to Be Traders.* An empire that had posted nobody in its provinces and could not see them, whose merchants were therefore its eyes, and whose intelligence had in consequence the shape of a trade report.

8 — Elite Coordination and the Default. *The Radius of a Marriage.* One of the finest internal coordination machines in the collection, with no instrument for extending it beyond the reach of a marriage — and a fracture caused by the apex operating it correctly.

9 — Plurality or Foreclosure. *The Interiors of Humble Houses.* Where the protections came from, which was never the peasant; and why the one group below the nobility that won real legal autonomy had to hide every sign of it from the street.

10 — Change and Collapse. *The Army That Did Not Come.* An order that in two centuries never faced a rising of its own commoners and was destroyed in two years by its own subject rulers, once five arrested tax collectors had proved that the threat was empty.

11 — The Grim Accounting. *The Dike That Was Never Rebuilt.* Two columns, a hundred to one apart: the sword, which can be estimated within an order of magnitude and no better, and the metabolic note called by the disappearance of the administration the sword removed.

12 — Convergence and Divergence. *Two Cities That Could Not See Each Other.* The Triple Alliance set beside the Roman Republic, chosen because the two shared no menu; the same characteristic move and opposite outcomes; and the strongest case against this study's own method — that we can only read the orders that lasted — stated in full and answered without flinching.

A note on sources. This front matter is descriptive and makes no primary-source claims of its own; every factual assertion about the case is established, with its sources, in the module it summarises. The framework it describes is the series'; the disciplines it lists are the ones the modules hold themselves to and document in their own closing notes. The account of change in Module 10 leans on the series' own *Elite Chaos*, which

in turn leans on Skocpol on state breakdown and on Goldstone and Turchin on elite overproduction; the comparative essay in Module 12 draws throughout on *The Roman Republic: The Complete Study* in this same collection, and every Roman assertion belongs to that study rather than to this one.

THE WORD FOR CRAFTSMAN

Landscape · the valley of Mexico on the eve of the alliance — a lake-country of small states whose ruling order was itself a former conquest naturalised so completely that a dead empire's name had become the ordinary word for a skilled man; and the latecomers who arrived owning no share of that inheritance, hired their spears to the power that did, and spent fifty years learning the trade they would later take over

Begin with the ground, because the ground sets the terms of everything that follows and it is unlike the ground of any other case in this collection. The basin of Mexico is a high enclosed bowl at about two thousand two hundred and forty metres, with no outlet to the sea, and in 1428 its floor was occupied by a chain of five shallow lakes running roughly north to south — Zumpango, Xaltocan, Texcoco, Xochimilco, Chalco — covering on the standard reconstruction something on the order of a thousand five hundred square kilometres, joined into one sheet in the wet season and separating toward the dry. Texcoco, the largest, sat lowest and everything drained into it, which made it saline; the two southern lakes were fed by springs and were fresh. That single fact of chemistry decided where the wealth of the basin lay, because fresh water could be farmed and salt water could not, and the drained plots called *chinampas* — beds of muck and vegetation raised out of the shallows and anchored with willows — turned the southern marshes into some of the most productive agricultural land in the pre-industrial world, cropping several times a year without fallow.

Around that water lived, at the eve of the Spanish arrival, somewhere between one and three million people, a range that is not a failure of research but the actual state of the evidence: the great archaeological survey of the basin, running from the 1960s into the 1970s, put the 1519 figure near one and a quarter million, while other reconstructions run to two or three, and the modules that follow will give ranges wherever the record disagrees rather than choose. Whatever the true number, the density was extraordinary for a society without draught animals, and the settlement pattern that survey recovered was not a scatter of villages but a dense lattice of small towns — around the freshwater lakes, seven nucleated centres spaced six to eight kilometres apart, each with its ring of villages and hamlets, and comparable clusters west, east and north. The basin was one of the most tightly packed political landscapes on earth, and every one of those centres was a state.

Two absences shaped the politics as decisively as the water. There were no wheeled vehicles in use for transport and there were no draught animals, so everything that moved overland moved on a man's back: the *tlameme*, the professional porter, trained from childhood, carrying something in the order of twenty-three kilograms and covering perhaps twenty to twenty-eight kilometres in a day before handing on. Overland bulk was therefore ruinously expensive, and the distance a state could reach with an army, a tax collector, or a load of maize was set by how far a column of men could carry its own food before eating it. The lakes cancelled that constraint for anyone who sat on them. A dugout canoe moved cargo across the basin at a cost no porter could approach, which is why the market at Tlatelolco could be provisioned from the chinampa districts twenty kilometres south, why the towns clustered on the shores rather than the good farmland behind them, and why an island in the middle of the water — worthless as ground, worth a great deal as a wharf — could become a capital. The whole shape of what the Mexica would build was already implied in the difference between what a man can carry and what a boat can float.

An order already conquered, twice

The valley the Mexica entered was not an ancient homeland and it was not a baseline. It was the residue of at least two earlier conquest states, each of which had been dead long enough that what remained of it was no longer remembered as a conquest at all.

Fifty kilometres north-east of the lakes stood the ruins of a city that had held between a hundred and twenty-five thousand and two hundred thousand people at its height, laid out on a deliberate grid along a five-kilometre avenue, and which had projected its style, its gods and possibly its armies as far as the Maya lowlands. Its elite quarters were systematically burned somewhere around the middle of the sixth century — the burning confined to the ruling class's buildings, which is why the current reading favours revolt or ritual termination over foreign sack — and the place was substantially empty by the eighth. Nobody in 1428 knew what its builders had called it, what language they spoke, or who had ruled there. What the Nahuatl speakers of the basin called it was *Teotihuacan*, the place where the gods were made, and they had furnished the empty pyramids with a story: that the present age, the fifth sun, had begun there when two gods threw themselves into a fire and rose as the sun and the moon. Mexica rulers went there on pilgrimage; Teotihuacan masks, centuries old when they were buried, were placed as offerings in the Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlan. A city they had never seen alive, whose people they could not name, had become the place where the world began.

Nearer in time stood Tula, in the dry country to the north-west, prominent from roughly the mid-tenth to the mid-twelfth century, and here the naturalisation had gone further still, because Tula had not merely become a sacred site but a title. Every account the sixteenth century collected agreed that the *Tolteca* had been the makers of civilisation itself, and the agreement had worked its way down into the dictionary: by the time Sahagún's Nahua informants dictated Book Ten of the Florentine Codex, *toltecatl* was simply the ordinary word for a skilled craftsman, and the entry defining the good one runs like any trade description — *"In qualli toltecatl, mozcaliani, mozcalia, mimati, moiolnonotzani tlalnamiquini"*, "the good craftsman [is] able, discreet, prudent, resourceful, retentive." A political order dead for two hundred and fifty years had decayed into a noun for a man who is good with his hands. Modern archaeology is sceptical of the Aztec picture of Tula as the capital of a great empire, and the sceptics are probably right; but the accuracy of the picture is not the point and never was. The point is that in the fifteenth-century basin, descent from Tula was the only currency in which the right to rule was denominated, and everybody who mattered claimed it. The Tepanecs at Azcapotzalco claimed it. The Acolhua at Texcoco claimed it. Culhuacan, on the southern shore, claimed to be the oldest Toltec foundation of all and traded on that claim for two centuries after it had ceased to matter militarily.

This is what the framework means when it says a conqueror never meets an aboriginal order — and the valley makes the point with unusual force, because the sequence is legible. Whoever first built the coordination at Teotihuacan and captured it did so by means now lost; the arrangement ran long enough for its form to be copied everywhere in Mesoamerica; the state died and its name became a shrine. Whatever Tula actually was, it ran long enough for its name to become a word. And the men who ruled the basin in 1428, when they explained why they and not others should govern, were reaching for a warrant issued by a state that no living person had ever seen operate. None of this makes their belief a pretence. It is the reverse: a thing built and then allowed to run for three centuries becomes the furniture of the world, and a valley in which every claimant, rival and subject alike agreed on the same currency of legitimacy was a valley in which that currency was real. It was simply also a thing that had been made.

What Tezozomoc built

There is a persistent way of telling this history in which the Mexica invent the tribute empire. They did not. They inherited a working one, and the man who built it ruled from Azcapotzalco on the western shore for something close to sixty years.

Tezozomoc — the chronology is uncertain and the tradition's claim that he reigned from about 1367 or 1370 until 1426 would make him improbably old, so it should be held loosely — assembled, out of the same materials everyone else in the basin had, an arrangement that would still be recognisable a century later under different management. He conquered outward from the Tepanec towns of the west shore: north to Xaltocan, whose Otomí population was broken and whose site the documentary record shows lying largely abandoned for a generation afterwards; south against Culhuacan, Xochimilco, Cuitlahuac and Mizquic; east, over decades, against the Acolhua of Texcoco, exploiting their internal quarrels until Ixtlilxochitl was killed around 1418 and Texcoco's provinces passed under Tepanec control. By 1420 most of the basin answered to Azcapotzalco.

What matters for everything that follows is *how* he held it, because the method was cheap and it was the method the Mexica would take over unchanged. He did not garrison the conquered towns, replace their ruling houses with his own officials, survey their land, or govern them. He left each defeated *altepetl* — the word means water-and-hill, the standard central Mexican small state, ruled by a *tlatoani*, a speaker, and internally divided into the wards called *calpolli* that rotated the duties of temple service, labour draft and tribute delivery among themselves — sitting on its own foundations with its own dynasty, and required of it a schedule of goods and a supply of warriors. Where he could, he improved the arrangement by putting his own sons on the thrones in question: one of them, Quaquapitzahuac, was installed as the first *tlatoani* of Tlatelolco in 1376, and the pattern of placing kinsmen and marrying daughters into subordinate houses recurs across his reign. The conquered were not administered. They were billed.

This is an extremely economical way to hold a country in which a load of maize cannot travel a hundred kilometres without being eaten by the men carrying it, and it has a defect that Tezozomoc's successors would discover in the most direct possible way. Every town that paid kept its own ruler, its own warriors, its own gods and its own memory of having been beaten. Nothing in the arrangement dissolved a defeated polity; it only obliged it. The arrangement that made conquest affordable left the raw material of every future revolt precisely where it had been found — and the first people to prove it were the Tepanecs themselves.

The people who had to buy a bloodline

Into this the Mexica came last, and the tradition is unanimous and unembarrassed about how badly it went.

They arrived in the basin as one of the later waves of Nahuatl-speaking migrants from the north, a movement the annals date by their own reckoning and the chronologies of which are irrecoverable in any Western sense. They were driven from Chapultepec, on the western shore, by neighbours who did not want them. They were permitted by the ruler of Culhuacan to occupy Tizaapan, a stretch of bad ground, in a relationship the sources describe as service. Their tenure there ended in a quarrel with their hosts that the tradition itself records as a Mexica atrocity, and they fled into the water. Around 1325 — some codices say 1325, one seventeenth-century calculation says 1327, and the annals of Tlatelolco supply a day sign — they settled on an island in the western shallows of Lake Texcoco and called it Tenochtitlan. Within about a dozen years a dissident faction had split off to the northern end of the same island and founded Tlatelolco under its own line of rulers, so that the Mexica entered the fifteenth century divided between two cities on one rock.

Consider the position, because everything the Mexica did for the next century follows from it and nothing in it is mysterious. They held an island of no agricultural value in a saline lake, in a basin where every square mile of good ground already had an owner with a dynasty on it. They had, as far as anyone in the valley recognised, no Toltec descent and therefore no claim to legitimate rule of any kind. They had a patron god, Huitzilopochtli, whom nobody else worshipped. And they had the one asset a landless people can convert: fighting men, in a country of fifty small states permanently at war with one another.

They spent that asset and they bought with it the two things they lacked. The first purchase was the warrant. Around 1376 — the codices disagree, giving ranges from the 1350s to the 1400s for his reign — the Mexica installed as their first *tlatoani* a man named Acamapichtli, whose value lay entirely in his mother's side: the tradition makes him the son of a Mexica father and a noblewoman of Culhuacan, and thus of the Toltec line, and has him married to a Culhua princess as well. The Mexica did not have the descent that made rule legitimate in the valley's own currency, so they went to the town that had the most of it and least ability to refuse, and married it in. Thereafter they were the Culhua-Mexica, and a people whose grandfathers had been chased off Chapultepec had a dynasty that could be spoken of in the same grammar as anyone else's. It is worth pausing on how cheap this was. Culhuacan could not audit the claim, because Culhuacan's own Toltec descent was itself a claim; Tula could not object, having been in ruins for two centuries; and there was no register anywhere in Mesoamerica against which the assertion could be checked. The Mexica bought a warrant nobody was in a position to refuse them, and paid for it in a marriage.

The second purchase was position, and it took fifty years. In the same year that Acamapichtli was seated, Tezozomoc placed his own son on the throne of neighbouring Tlatelolco, and Tenochtitlan settled into the Tepanec orbit as a tributary — paying in goods and, decisively, in warriors. For half a century Mexica contingents fought Tezozomoc's wars: against the Chalca in the south-east, against the Otomí of Xaltocan in 1395, against the Acolhua of Texcoco in the campaigns that ended with Ixtlilxochitl dead. The conquests were Azcapotzalco's; the Mexica took what auxiliaries take. But they were being paid in something that does not appear on any tribute list. They were learning, campaign by campaign, exactly how the machine on the western shore was assembled — which towns paid what, which dynasties resented which, how a schedule was set and enforced, how far an army could go before it starved. A subordinate who operates a system for fifty years knows it in a way its owner's heirs may not.

They improved their position by the same instrument they had used to buy the bloodline. Acamapichtli's successor Huitzilihuitl married a daughter of Tezozomoc; their son Chimalpopoca was thus the old lord of Azcapotzalco's grandson, and the sources report the burden on Tenochtitlan easing as a result — one tradition has the tribute cut sharply at the birth of the heir. The island meanwhile stopped being only an island: the Mexica extended *chinampas* around it, took chinampa ground from Xochimilco, and dug the canals that let canoes come into the city. Durán, writing in the sixteenth century from native sources, preserves the flavour of the earlier decades in a story about Azcapotzalco demanding a raft planted with vegetables carrying a duck and a heron whose eggs were to hatch at the moment of delivery — a tale which is certainly not a tribute record and is probably not history, but which is exact about the *relation*, and about how the Mexica later chose to remember it.

Three deaths and a vacancy

Then, in a little over a year, the arrangement that had held the basin for sixty years came apart — not because the tributary towns rose, but because the ruling house at the top of it could not settle who was to sit in the chair.

Tezozomoc died in 1426 or 1427. His designated successor was his son Tayatzin. His son Maxtla, ruling Coyoacan, raised the Azcapotzalco nobility, took the throne, and had Tayatzin killed. Chimalpopoca of Tenochtitlan had backed the loser. What happened to him next the sources will not agree on: most say Maxtla had him killed, Durán has him murdered in his own palace on Tepanec orders along with his son, others have him taken to Azcapotzalco and dying there, others again have him take his own life, and at least one modern reading of the record — Camilla Townsend's —

notes that the second obvious suspect is his own uncle and eventual successor. What is not in dispute is that he was dead in 1427, that a short-lived successor named in the *Crónica Mexicayotl* held the mat for about sixty days and then died too, and that the man who emerged from the wreckage was Itzcoatl, a son of Acamapichtli by a Tepanec woman of Azcapotzalco — so that the ruler who would destroy the Tepanec order was himself half Tepanec, and had spent his career inside it.

Now read the position of each of the men who mattered, because the alliance that followed was not a design and every party to it was solving a different problem with what he had to hand.

Itzcoatl held a city under blockade, with its tribute raised as punishment and its ruling house twice decapitated in a year, in a basin where the power that had beaten everyone else was now held by a usurper who had just demonstrated that he killed inconvenient relatives. Submission was available and had a price he could calculate exactly, because his city had been paying it for fifty years and it had just gone up. Resistance was available because he knew the machine's wiring, and knew that Maxtla, in seizing the throne over a designated heir and killing his way to security, had converted a great many placed kinsmen across the basin from beneficiaries into men with a grievance and a retinue.

Nezahualcoyotl held nothing at all: an Acolhua prince in exile, his father killed by Tezozomoc's people around 1418, his patrimony at Texcoco in Tepanec hands. For him a war against Azcapotzalco was not a gamble but the only route by which he could become anything, and the cost of losing was a condition he was already in.

Totoquihuaztli of Tlacopan held a small Tepanec town on the western shore, subordinate to Azcapotzalco, close enough to Tenochtitlan to be crushed early in any war, and governed by a lineage tied to the same royal house Maxtla had just seized by force. He was a Tepanec who had lost by the Tepanec succession, which made him worth more to the rebels than his weight in warriors.

They fought in 1427 and 1428, with initial support from Huexotzinco beyond the mountains, which afterwards withdrew. The length of the siege of Azcapotzalco is given variously in the sources as a matter of weeks, forty days, a hundred and fourteen days, or some months; the outcome is not in doubt. The city fell, Maxtla was killed, and the Tepanec hegemony passed to the men who had broken it.

The settlement of 1428, and the fire

What the victors did next has been described ever since as the founding of an empire. It is better described, and more accurately, as three men dividing a going concern.

The Tepanec lands were carved among the three cities. Future conquests were to be undertaken jointly and the ground held in common. And the revenue was divided by a fixed rule that the tradition reports as two fifths each to Tenochtitlan and Texcoco and one fifth to Tlacopan — a ratio that comes to us principally through Acolhua sources and should be read knowing it: the Texcocan chroniclers had every reason to record an arrangement in which their city was an equal, and the Mexica ones every reason to record a Tenochtitlan that led from the start. Both cannot be flatly true, the historiography has argued the point at length, and the honest statement is that a two-two-one division is well attested as the formula and that what it meant in practice moved steadily in Tenochtitlan's favour across the following ninety years.

Nothing in this settlement was new. The tribute schedule was Tezozomoc's instrument. The practice of leaving a beaten town its dynasty and billing it was Tezozomoc's practice. The placing of kinsmen on subordinate thrones was Tezozomoc's method, and Tlacopan itself — a Tepanec town under a Tepanec lineage — was the old order continuing under new ownership. What changed at Azcapotzalco in 1428 was not the machine but the tenancy, and the men who took it over had spent fifty years working in it.

One thing, however, was genuinely made rather than inherited, and it is the last event of this landscape. The Florentine Codex, in the chapter of Book Ten that runs through the peoples of central Mexico, records in the section on the Mexica that the painted histories were destroyed on the order of a council of Mexica lords in Itzcoatl's reign. The Nahuatl runs:

> *"Ca mopiaia in jtoloca; Ca iquac tlatlac in tlatocat Itzcoatl, in mexico: innenonotzal mochiuh in mexica tlatoque, qujtoque: amo monequj mochi tlacatl qujmatiz, in tlilli, in tlapalli, in tlatconj, in tlamamalonj, avilqujçaz: auh injn, çan naoalmanjz in tlalli, ic mjec mopic in jztlacaiutl."*
> *"The history of it was saved, but it was burned when Itzcoatl ruled in Mexico. A council of rulers of Mexico took place. They said: 'It is not necessary for all the common people to know of the writings; government will be defamed, and this will only spread sorcery in the land; for it containeth many falsehoods.'"*

The translation is Anderson and Dibble's. Two of the phrases in the Nahuatl are the paired couplets in which Nahuatl states large abstractions: *in tlilli, in tlapalli*, the black ink and the red paint, is the standard expression for writing and the learned tradition it carries; *in tlatconi, in tlamamaloni*, the thing carried and the thing borne on the back, is built from the ordinary verbs of a porter's work and is what the translators render as

government — rule as a load a man carries. The sentence, read in its own idiom, says that the record and the burden of rule both belong to the same small number of hands.

It is worth being clear about what this passage is and is not. It is not a Mexica state document; it is a line dictated by Nahua informants to a Franciscan a generation after the conquest, in a compilation made to identify idolatry for extirpation, and it survives because a friar wanted it. It does not say what was written in its place, and the claim that a Toltec descent was manufactured at this moment is an inference the passage itself does not make. But the passage says plainly that the destruction happened, that it was decided in council rather than by one man, and that the reason given was that ordinary people should not have the writings. That is a very unusual thing to have in the record. Founding orders are normally caught only by their results; here the deliberation survives, in the words of the people whose grandparents took the decision, and it comes at exactly the moment when a city that had spent a century as somebody's auxiliary had just become the senior partner in the basin and needed a past to match.

Reading the valley against the framework

The framework holds that no apex mints legitimacy; he borrows it, and only in a currency the audience whose compliance he needs already honours. The valley of Mexico confirms this so completely that it sharpens it, and the sharpening is this landscape's contribution.

The most useful legitimating currency is one whose issuer is dead. In the basin in 1428 the single recognised warrant for legitimate rule was descent from Tula — a state gone for two and a half centuries, whose actual extent modern archaeology doubts, and whose name had by then worn down into the ordinary word for a craftsman. Precisely because no institution stood behind the currency, three things followed that a living issuer would have prevented. Nobody could audit a claim to it, so Culhuacan's descent and the Tepanecs' and the Acolhua's and eventually the Mexica's could all stand together without any of them being falsified. Nobody could withhold it, so it could be acquired by the cheapest instrument a weak claimant possesses — a marriage — rather than won by submission to a living superior who would have set a price and kept collecting. And nobody could revoke it, so a warrant once obtained was permanent, which is not true of legitimacy borrowed from a living pope, caliph or khan. A dead issuer's currency is the cheapest and most durable there is, and the poorer the claimant the more attractive it becomes: the Mexica, who could not have compelled recognition from anybody, bought in 1376 the one credential that could not be refused them and never afterwards had to renew it.

This has a second half, and the two together are one finding. The warrant and the seat came apart, and they came apart in opposite directions. The framework's cheapest item — occupy the office from which the beaten order was already administering its own answer — is written for a stranger, and asks whether an outsider can sit down in a seat vested in an office rather than a bloodline. The Mexica were not strangers. They spoke the language, shared the gods, had married into the ruling house, and had operated the tribute machine as auxiliaries for two generations; access was never their problem. Their problem was the warrant, and they solved that first, by marriage, fifty years before the seat became available. Then in 1428 they took the seat by force, because unlike the warrant its holder was alive and had to be killed. So the sharper pair of questions to put to any claimant is not one but two: *is there a seat, and can he sit in it* — and *does he already hold the warrant, or only the seat?* A stranger short of the warrant must forge or legislate one and will find the office hollowing under him. An insider short of the seat, holding a warrant issued by nobody in particular, need only wait for the succession to go wrong.

It went wrong in 1426, and it went wrong from above. No tributary town rose. The order that had held the basin for sixty years came apart because a designated heir was displaced by a brother who then had to kill his way to safety, converting the placed kinsmen who were the arrangement's own supports into men with standing, warriors, and a reason. The framework's claim that structural change comes from a crack inside the hierarchy rather than a rising of the ruled is confirmed here before the study's subject has properly begun — and confirmed in a form that ought to make the reader uneasy about the ninety years to come, because the arrangement the victors carried off intact from the ruins of Azcapotzalco was the same one whose defect had just been demonstrated. Tezozomoc's method left every conquered town its ruler, its warriors and its grievance, which is what made conquest cheap. The Mexica took the method without amendment. Whether the thing that killed the Tepanec order was a fault in Maxtla or a fault in the machine is the question this study exists to answer, and the answer will decide what happened in 1519.

One discipline to close, because it will be under strain in every module that follows. To say that the valley's order was a former conquest naturalised, that the Toltec warrant was manufactured, and that Itzcoatl's council burned the record, is not to say that any of it was fake or that the people who held it were fools. It is the opposite. A currency that everyone honours is a real currency whatever its origin; a warrant nobody can refuse is a real warrant; and a belief driven through three centuries of formation until a dead empire's name has become a compliment paid to a good stonecutter has stopped being a policy and become the world. That the origin was built does not make the

belief a lie. It makes it a thing that was built and then became real, which is stronger and lasts longer than a lie ever could — and it is why the men in this study who defended the arrangement to the end were not defending a fraud they had seen through, but the ground they stood on.

A note on sources. The two exact quotations are from the Nahuatl text of Sahagún's Florentine Codex, Book Ten, in the Anderson and Dibble edition and translation (School of American Research and the University of Utah): the description of the good *toltecatl* (*"In qualli toltecatl, mozcaliani..."*) at page 25, and the account of the burning of the histories under Itzcoatl (*"Ca mopiaia in jtoloca..."*) at page 191, both reproduced here as the published edition gives them and as they are cited in the scholarly literature. The gloss of *in tlilli, in tlapalli* as the standard couplet for writing follows the standard lexicography, including Molina's 1571 vocabulary; the reading of *in tlatconi, in tlamamaloni* as the burden of rule follows the translators' rendering and the ordinary sense of the verbs, and is offered as a gloss rather than a certainty. The Florentine Codex is the best evidence available for this world and it is also a Franciscan compilation of indigenous testimony gathered a generation after the conquest for the purpose of identifying idolatry; that is said once here and holds for every module.

Chronologies are given as the sources give them and disagree. The reign dates of Acamapichtli vary by codex — roughly 1367–1387 in Chimalpahin, 1376–1395 in the Codex Aubin, 1350–1403 in the Codex Chimalpopoca — and are given here as a range. The foundation of Tenochtitlan is placed in 1325 by the codices Azcatitlan, Mexicanus and Mendoza, with 1327 from a later calculation. Tezozomoc's death is given as 1426 or 1427 and the reported length of his reign should be treated with caution. The manner of Chimalpopoca's death is reported differently by Durán, the *Crónica Mexicayotl* and Alva Ixtlilxochitl's history, and the observation that Itzcoatl is among the suspects is Camilla Townsend's. The length of the siege of Azcapotzalco is variously reported. The two-fifths / two-fifths / one-fifth division of tribute is the formula the tradition records, transmitted chiefly through Acolhua sources, and its practical application is disputed; the standard treatment is Pedro Carrasco's study of the Triple Alliance, with Charles Gibson's earlier work on the valley.

Modern scholarship is paraphrased and credited, not quoted: the basin's demography, settlement pattern and lake system from the Sanders, Parsons and Santley survey and the literature that followed it, with the 1519 population given as a range of roughly one to three million because the schools genuinely differ; the transport constraint and the porter's load and daily stage from Ross Hassig's work on trade and transportation, with the wider economic picture from Kenneth Hirth and Frances Berdan; the archaeology and abandonment of Teotihuacan, and the scepticism about

the Aztec picture of Tula, from the standard site literature; the *altepetl* and *calpolli* as institutions from James Lockhart and Michael E. Smith; the structure of the later empire, and the substantial revision of the older picture of a purely hegemonic tribute state, from Berdan, Blanton, Boone, Hodge, Smith and Umberger's *Aztec Imperial Strategies*, which the modules on extraction and coordination will take up directly. Durán's story of the raft, the duck and the heron is given as what it is — a sixteenth-century narrative from native informants, retained for what it shows about how the relation was remembered, not as a tribute record.

THE ARMY THAT WENT HOME

Module 1 · The Floor of Force — an order that conquered without garrisoning, disarmed nobody, and returned its soldiers to their fields after every campaign, so that what held a beaten town through the twenty years before the next visit was not a force present but the memory of one; and the atrocity, on that arithmetic, was not an excess laid over the conquest but the price of having no occupation

The first thing to establish about the Mexica floor of force is that it did not exist most of the time. There was no standing army. There were no soldiers in the sense of men whose occupation was soldiering and who could be posted somewhere and left there. The force that took ninety years' worth of towns was the adult male commoner population of the allied cities, called out of the fields and the workshops by their wards, marched, fought, and sent home — supplemented, as the empire grew, by contingents levied from the towns already paying tribute.

The mechanism of the call-up ran through the *calpolli*, the ward that was the basic subdivision of every central Mexican town, and through the ward's school. Each *calpolli* in Tenochtitlan maintained a *telpochcalli*, a house of youths, and on the reconstruction from the sixteenth-century sources there were twenty of them in the city in 1519, each holding on the order of four hundred to five hundred and fifty young men between fifteen and twenty. A boy entered at about fifteen, dedicated to Tezcatlipoca, and was handed over by his parents to the school's masters with a formal speech in which they said they did not know how to raise him and were giving him away — the Nahuatl of it turns on a pair of images, the spindle and the weaver's reed on one side, the eagle and the jaguar on the other, which is to say a choice between making him a woman's child and making him a warrior. He slept at the school, ate at home, swept, laid the fires, did penance, and was taken on campaign as a veteran's shield-bearer to carry the man's arms and supplies and lose his fear of battle. The nobility's schools, the *calmecac*, took boys earlier and taught them the calendar, the songs, the painted books and the law as well as the weapons.

That is the whole of the apparatus, and its consequence is the largest structural fact in this study. In Tenochtitlan the floor of force and the governed population were the same men. There was no separable coercive class — no praetorian guard, no professional corps drawing pay, no body of armed specialists who could be turned on the city that housed them. The framework's standard question at this module — who

held organised violence, and who was disarmed — returns a strange answer here: organised violence was held by everybody, in rotation, part of the year, and nobody at all was disarmed. Not the Mexica commoner, who was the army. And, far more consequentially, not the conquered.

What twenty-three kilograms decides

The second fact is a constraint, and it drew the empire's map more exactly than any decision anybody made.

Central Mexico had no wheeled transport in use and no draught animals. Overland, everything moved on a man's back: the *tlameme*, the professional porter, carrying something in the order of twenty-three kilograms and covering perhaps twenty to twenty-eight kilometres before handing on to a relay. An army marched at something between two and a half and four kilometres an hour, making a day's stage of roughly nineteen to thirty-two kilometres depending on urgency and ground. A column of any size stretched for many kilometres along trails built for single file.

Follow the arithmetic from the commissariat's side and the shape of everything follows. Men on campaign eat, and the food has to be carried by men who also eat, so an army provisioning itself from its own baggage consumes its supply at a rate that puts a hard ceiling on how far it can go before it must be fed from outside. The Mexica solution was not to solve the problem but to relocate it: messengers went out two days ahead to the towns along the designated route, and those towns fed the army as it passed and again on its return. This works beautifully, and it has one condition. **The towns along the route must already be paying.** An Aztec army could march comfortably only across ground that was already tributary, which meant that conquest could extend the empire by roughly one campaign's reach beyond its existing accounts and no further, and that each new province had to be digested — put on the tribute rolls, made to feed passing columns — before the next one beyond it could be attempted. The map of the empire is a map of its own ledger, extended one march at a time.

Ross Hassig, whose reconstruction of the logistics is the foundation of all of this, drew the further conclusion that a state so constrained cannot rule by presence and must rule by reputation, and the sixteenth-century evidence bears him out at every point. Inside the basin the constraint relaxed, because canoes crossed the lakes carrying loads no column of porters could match, which is precisely why an island in a salt lake was worth a capital. Outside the basin the constraint bound absolutely, and it is the reason a state that fielded armies numbered in the tens of thousands could not hold a

province two hundred kilometres away with anything except the promise of coming back.

Weapons made to take a man alive

The armament was wood, stone and cotton, and it was formidable. The *macuahuitl* was a flat hardwood sword edged along both sides with obsidian blades set in resin; Bernal Díaz, who saw the royal armouries, described broadswords set with stone knives that cut better than Spanish steel and lances whose blades, driven into a shield, would not come out. There were thrusting spears, the *atlatl* and its darts, bows, and slings; the Matlatzinca were noted slingers. Body protection was *ichcahuipilli*, quilted cotton, effective against obsidian and, as the Spaniards discovered, against arrows; and shields, some of them rolled up when not in use and let down to cover a man from head to foot. Only leaders wore the armour. A novice went into his first battle in maguey fibre and body paint.

The tactical peculiarity is that advancement was measured in captives rather than kills. Killing mattered — the battle accounts are full of it — but a warrior rose by bringing men back alive, and a good deal of the training was in how to do it. This has been offered as an explanation for the Spanish victory, and Matthew Restall has largely dismantled that reading by pointing out that the Mexica adapted to a war of killing quickly and fought the siege of 1521 ferociously. What the capture requirement really did was more interesting than a tactical handicap: it turned every campaign into a mint.

The ladder made of other people

The promotion system is set out in the Codex Mendoza and in Sahagún's informants' testimony, and it is one of the most exactly specified status ladders in the pre-modern record. A youth who had taken no captive wore a lock of hair at the back of his head and, if he had gone out three or four times and taken nothing, was mocked with a name meaning a youth with a baby's lock. A first captive taken unaided brought him before the ruler, his face painted with ochre, and got him a warrior's cloak. A second brought a cloak with red trim. A third made him a *tiachcauh*, a leader of youths, and sent him back into the school to instruct the boys. A fourth made him *tequihuah*, a veteran, entitled to have his hair cut in the veteran's fashion and to bear a veteran's title.

Beyond four the ladder stopped counting bodies and started grading them. Ten Huaxtec captives brought a man nothing further. A fifth captive taken from Atlixco, Huexotzinco or Tliliuhquitepec — the towns of the Tlaxcala-Puebla valley across the mountains — made him *cuauhyahcatl*, a great captain, with a blue lip-plug, a headband

with two tufts of eagle feathers set with flint knives of silver, and a specified list of capes. A further one from the same places moved the flint knives to gold, the lip-plug to yellow, and the man to *tlacochcalcatl* or *tlacateccatl*, the highest military offices in the state.

Three features of this arrangement do enormous work. The first is that the insignia were not inheritable: they were awarded by the ruler, and when a warrior died they were burned or buried with him, so that every generation of the coercive class had to go and earn its own. The second is that wearing insignia one had not earned was punished with death, and the sumptuary rules ran all the way down — a commoner's cloak could not fall below the knee on pain of death, unless it was covering war wounds on his legs, which is a law with a small door cut in it precisely where the state wanted men to walk through. The third is that a commoner who did earn his way became *cuauhpilli*, a noble by achievement: exempt from tribute, granted land, seated in the war council. But not fully: he could not have tenants on his land, could not sell it to a commoner, and his origin was remembered, though his sons were nobles outright.

That is a real valve, and its costs and limits belong to a later module. What matters here is that the Mexica floor of force ran on a currency minted in the bodies of specific named enemies, and that the highest denominations were minted only in one place. An institution whose entire promotion schedule is denominated in captives from Atlixco and Huexotzinco has a permanent, structural, non-negotiable interest in the continued existence of Atlixco and Huexotzinco — which is the fact standing behind the most disputed question in the whole subject, and one this module must now take up carefully, because the Mexica gave one answer, their enemies gave another, and only one of them can be right.

The first wars of the new order

Before that, the founding. The order established in 1428 announced itself in the ordinary way, by taking the towns nearest to hand, and the sequence is instructive because the first war of the new dispensation was fought over building materials.

Azcapotzalco fell in 1428 and Maxtla was killed. Coyoacan followed; the recorded provocation is that it broke off trading relations with Tenochtitlan, which in a country whose roads were also its only transport was the recognised way of declaring war, since obstructing a road announced an intention to cut relations rather than actually stopping anybody. Then, in 1430, Tenochtitlan required Xochimilco to supply stone and timber for the enlargement of the temple of Huitzilopochtli. Xochimilco refused. It was blockaded, besieged and taken; its lands were distributed among Itzcoatl's closest supporters; and it supplied not only the stone and the timber but the labour to build

the causeway that joined the island to the mainland on the south. Mizquic followed in 1432, Cuitlahuac in 1433, and Culhuacan; in 1439 Itzcoatl went outside the basin for the first time, against Cuauhnahuac beyond the southern mountains. Itzcoatl took the title Lord of the Culhua; Totoquihuaztli of Tlacopan took Lord of the Tepanecs.

Read the Xochimilco war from the position that generated it and it is not a holy war and not a land grab, but both at once and neither separately. A ruler on an island with a new god's temple to enlarge needs stone, which the island does not have; needs timber, which the island does not have; needs a road to the mainland, which the island does not have; and needs to distribute something to the men who had just fought the Tepanec war for him. The demand for building materials, the war, the estates handed to the victors and the causeway are one transaction with four faces. The sacred requirement and the infrastructure requisition were the same document, and there is no evidence and no need to suppose that anyone involved experienced them as two things.

Nobody was disarmed

Now the omission, and it is the module's centre.

The framework's question at this point in a study is normally productive: who was disarmed, who was made unable to disperse, what capacity did the conquest convert. Applied to the Mexica the question returns almost nothing, and the nothing is the finding. A town beaten by the Triple Alliance kept its ruling dynasty. It kept its ruler's household and lands. It kept its own laws, its own gods, its own customs and its own quarrels with its neighbours. It kept its warriors, its weapons, its schools where those warriors were trained, and — where it had them — its walls. What it acquired was a schedule of goods to deliver at stated intervals, an obligation to feed and sometimes reinforce armies passing through, and, in a minority of cases, a resident steward to see that the schedule was met.

There is a shortlist of exceptions and it is worth stating precisely because it is so short. The Triple Alliance did plant settlements at strategic points, and the sixteenth-century descriptions of them are unmistakably colonial rather than military: the settlement in the Oaxaca region is described by Durán as nine hundred married men with their families drawn from Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Chalco, Xochimilco, Cuauhnahuac and the Mazahua country; the settlements at Oztuma, Alahuiztlan and Teloloapan on the Tarascan frontier as two thousand men and families gathered from more than forty towns and warned to stay on their guard. These are colonists expected to furnish a local muster, not a standing garrison drawing pay. Oztuma, which the archaeology confirms as a genuine hilltop fortification, is the clearest real fortress in the record, and it faced the one neighbour the Mexica had comprehensively failed to beat.

Elsewhere Díaz lists forces on the frontiers — Soconusco, Coatzacoalcos, the Michoacán and Pánuco marches — but sixteenth-century Spanish *guarnición* meant a detachment of soldiers rather than a permanent garrison in the modern sense, and the reference is often vaguer than the English word suggests.

The pattern, then, is that fortification appears where the empire faced a rival state it could not defeat, and hardly anywhere it faced its own subjects. Hassig's summary of the doctrine is that security was sought in the offensive rather than in the static defence of fixed places, and the asymmetry with Michoacán makes the point unanswerably: the Tarascans fortified their side of that border, and the Mexica largely did not fortify theirs.

The price of having no garrison

Which leaves an obvious question. If a beaten town kept its army, its ruler and its walls, and the Mexica army went home to the maize after each campaign, what made anybody pay?

The answer the sources give, and it is given in the sources' own words and not inferred from behaviour, is that the conquest was made unforgettable so that it would not have to be repeated. Where an order occupies, it can afford proportion: the garrison is there, and the punishment can be measured. Where an order does not occupy, the initial demonstration is the whole of the enforcement, and it must be sized to carry across the years and the mountains until the next visit. **The scale of the violence is therefore not an excess laid over the conquest but the substitute for the occupation, and it is a measure of the occupation's absence.** What looks disproportionate against a garrisoned empire's objectives is exactly proportionate against this one's.

The Mexica did not leave this to chance, and here the evidence is remarkable, because the terror was administered as a communications system with a named distribution list. Sahagún's informants record that the rulers of enemy states were secretly brought to Tenochtitlan to watch festivals involving large numbers of sacrifices, and give the purpose plainly: so that they would go home and tell in their own countries what they had seen done with the captives. Durán describes Ahuitzotl secretly inviting the rulers of Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, Cholula, Michoacán and Metztitlan — states with which Tenochtitlan was at war — to his coronation in 1486 and to the rededication of the Great Temple the following year, with the stated intention of showing them the greatness of Mexico, bewildering them, filling them with fear, and demonstrating that the Mexica were masters of all the riches of the earth. They were fed, given lavish gifts, seated where they could see, and sent home. The

framework's usual diagnostic is that surveillance is the tell of a belief that never took; the Mexica ran almost no surveillance, because there was nobody stationed among their subjects to conduct any. Their tell is the opposite instrument and it points the same way. **They did not watch their subjects; they made certain their subjects had watched them.** An order that broadcasts is an order that cannot observe.

And notice who was on the list. Not populations — rulers. The floor of the Triple Alliance was aimed, with considerable precision, at a few hundred men who each held a town, and it was calibrated to their arithmetic: the cost of withholding tribute against the cost of the army returning. Toward the millions underneath them the Mexica spent nothing whatever. No mission was sent to convert a subject population, no school was opened for it, no doctrine was exported to it, no attempt was made to make an Otomí farmer or a Huaxtec fisherman think of himself as belonging to anything. The framework holds that an apex which pays a real, avoidable cost for legitimacy has revealed that some audience required it, and that where it secures force and spends nothing further, that silence is equally a finding. Both halves are visible here in the same decade. Tenochtitlan spent lavishly, and at real risk, on the belief of foreign kings. On the belief of its subjects it spent nothing, because it did not need it, because the tribute was delivered by the local ruler and not by the men who grew it.

The edges of the floor, dated

An order that rules by the credible expectation of return has one catastrophic vulnerability: the expectation can be falsified, publicly, by anyone who beats it. The Mexica were beaten repeatedly and the defeats are dated.

In or about 1478 Axayacatl invaded the Tarascan state to the west with an army the sources put at twenty-four to thirty-two thousand and met a larger force near Taximaloyan. Durán puts the Triple Alliance dead at 20,900 and Tezozómoc at 31,800; the figures are irreconcilable and both are enormous, and Axayacatl, wounded, withdrew and never went west again. About 1481 an army was humiliated at Metztitlán to the north-east, and Tizoc, who had led it, lost the confidence of the nobility so completely that the chroniclers say he was helped to die five years later. About 1496 armies of all three capitals were wrecked in the Oaxaca country. About 1503 a Triple Alliance force — Durán gives a hundred thousand, which is probably inflated — was routed at Atlixco with what the sources call a great slaughter, and Moctezuma II is described weeping bitterly at the reports. Around 1506 another indecisive bloodbath cost the alliance eight thousand two hundred men on Durán's count and ten thousand on Tezozómoc's. In or about 1517 a major offensive against Huexotzinco and Tlaxcala ended, in Durán's flat summary, with the Aztecs completely

vanquished and all their commanders taken prisoner — after which Moctezuma stripped the surviving officers of their insignia and revoked their sumptuary privileges.

That last detail is worth pausing on, because it shows the promotion currency running backwards. The honours that had been the mechanism for staffing the floor could be clawed back by the man who issued them, which means they were a real instrument of control over the coercive class and not merely decoration — and it means that a defeat abroad was immediately converted into a demotion at home, which tells you something about where the ruler thought his danger lay.

Quail in a cage

Which brings the module to the flower wars, the *xochiyaoyotl*, and to the sharpest piece of information asymmetry the sources afford, because on this question we have the public explanation, the private explanation, and the enemy's explanation, all three in sixteenth-century words.

The public explanation is the one Tenochtitlan gave to the Spaniards. Andrés de Tapia asked Moctezuma II directly why, having his enemies surrounded, he did not finish them; Moctezuma's reported answer was that they could easily do it, but then there would be nowhere near at hand for the young men to train, and they wished always to have people close by to sacrifice to the gods. The Texcocan tradition supplies a matching origin story: after the famine that followed the crop failures of 1450 to 1454, the priests declared that regular sacrifice was needed and that captives fetched from distant wars arrived exhausted and unfit, so a standing arrangement was made with the states across the mountains to meet on designated ground at fixed intervals, take captives, and not attempt to seize territory.

The private explanation is very different, and it survives in the *Crónica Mexicana* of Hernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, a great-grandson of Axayacatl, in the form of a proposal put by the counsellor Tlacaelel to Motecuhzoma I. There is nothing ritual about it:

> *"guerra cruel con ellos, para tener vasallage de ellos y tener que sacrificar á nuestros dioses; ... con estos vasallos harémos gran hacienda de sacrificios y rentas, riquezas y bienes ... y para nuestros tratos y grangerías nosotros los mexicanos, y que no sean tan lejos; bastará que los pongamos en Huexotzinco, Cholula, Atlixco, Itzucan ... adonde se rescaten y compremos esclavos, oro, piedras muy ricas de valor, y plumería ... Con estos tales mercados vendrán los tlaxcaltecas á ellos, y allí se comprarán y ellos se venderán por esclavos."*

"Cruel war with them, to have their vassalage and to have something to sacrifice to our gods; ... with these vassals we shall make a great estate of sacrifices and rents, riches and goods ... and for our dealings and profits, we Mexica, and not so far off; it will be enough that we set them up at Huexotzinco, Cholula, Atlixco, Itzucan ... where they may be ransomed and we may buy slaves, gold, very rich stones of value, and featherwork ... With such markets the Tlaxcalans will come to them, and there they will be bought, and they themselves will be sold as slaves."

Vassalage, rents, an estate, and above all markets near at hand. The god is in the second clause and the balance sheet occupies the rest.

The enemy's explanation is the flattest of the three. Diego Muñoz Camargo, writing the history of Tlaxcala from inside it, reported the current opinion that Moctezuma could have destroyed the Tlaxcalans and chose instead to keep them, in his phrase, *"like quail in a cage"* for training and for sacrifices — and then refused to believe it, for two reasons he states. First, that if it were true the lords of Tlaxcala would not have accepted the Spanish proposal to march on the Mexica as eagerly as they did. Second, and this is the sharper point, that the enmity was total: the two peoples never once intermarried, by any arrangement, which was not true of any other pair of provinces in central Mexico, where marriage across the line was ordinary. A cage whose occupants have been kept for sixty years as a convenience does not generate that.

The battle accounts settle it. Whatever the flower wars were in 1455, by the sixteenth century the encounters were producing thousands of dead on both sides, commanders taken, armies routed and a Mexica ruler weeping over his casualty returns and stripping his officers. Muñoz Camargo also records the Triple Alliance blockading Tlaxcala's trade — salt above all — for decades, which is not the behaviour of a state maintaining a training ground. Barry Isaac's conclusion, which the evidence supports, is that the Triple Alliance could not conquer the Tlaxcala-Puebla valley rather than would not: the valley's kingdoms fought as a bloc, were ringed by defensible mountains, were fortified, packed their frontiers with refugees from Mexica conquests elsewhere who had every reason to fight, and were never faced by the whole weight of the alliance, because the alliance was never free of rebellion long enough to bring it.

The honest reading is not that the ritual account was a lie. It is that it was a true description of what the institution had come to do — young men were trained there, captives were taken there, the promotion ladder's highest denominations were minted there — offered as an explanation of why the institution existed, which it was not. Moctezuma, asked by a foreigner why he had not conquered his neighbours, gave the answer that made a strategic failure into a policy. He was not going to tell Andrés de Tapia that he could not.

Reading the floor against the framework

Three things follow, and the first is the one this module contributes.

Where an order conquers without occupying, spectacular violence is not an excess laid over the conquest; it is the substitute for the garrison, and its scale measures the garrison's absence. The framework's existing tell — that surveillance is the mark of a belief that never took — assumes an apparatus present among the governed, watching. The Mexica had almost none, because they left almost nobody behind. Their equivalent instrument runs in the opposite direction and is easy to miss for that reason: instead of watching their subjects they arranged, deliberately and at expense, to be watched by them, bringing enemy and tributary rulers into the capital to witness sacrifices in numbers and sending them home to describe what they had seen. **Broadcast is the tell of an order with no garrison, as surveillance is the tell of a belief that never took**; and where a study finds an order investing heavily in being seen rather than in seeing, it should look for an occupation that was never established rather than for a cruelty that needs a cultural explanation. That the men doing this also believed the sun required blood is not in question and is not an alternative account; it is the subject of a later module, and the two readings are not rivals.

The second follows from the first and is the same finding turned toward the ledger. A floor that is a visit rather than a presence is extraordinarily cheap, and the Mexica bought with it a domain reaching from coast to coast at a running cost that no garrisoned empire could approach: no army to pay between campaigns, no fortresses to man, no administrators to post, no roads to build, the food for the marching column charged to the towns it passed through. And it purchased, in the same clause, the defect it would die of. Every arrangement that made the conquest affordable — leaving the dynasty, leaving the warriors, leaving the walls, leaving the grievance — left a beaten town holding everything it would need to change sides on the day the expectation of return stopped being credible. The empire's characteristic strength and its characteristic failure are not two facts. They are one fact, arriving at different times.

The third is a thread to carry forward rather than a conclusion. Because the army was the population, and because the campaigning force was increasingly made of contingents levied from subject towns, the Triple Alliance's floor was substantially composed of the people it was pointed at. In 1519 the lords of Tlaxcala explained this to Cortés themselves, in Bernal Díaz's account: the provinces Moctezuma had subdued were ill-disposed toward the Mexica and *"did not fight with good will,"* and it was from those very men that Tlaxcala received advance warning of the attacks coming against it. That is not hindsight and it is not a Spanish flourish. It is a description, given by the people it had protected for sixty years, of a floor that leaked because it was made of the

wrong men — and it is the crack that Module 10 will find already open when the strangers landed.

One discipline in closing. To read the sacrifice of captives as, among other things, the enforcement mechanism of an empire that could not garrison is to explain how the harm was organised, not to grant that it was justified, and the reconstruction of a logic is never a defence of what the logic produced. Nor is it a claim that the men who did it were cynics performing a rite they disbelieved; the evidence runs the other way and the next modules will show it running. The point of setting Moctezuma's answer to Tapia beside Tlacaelel's markets and beside a Tlaxcalan's flat refusal to believe either is not to convict anybody of hypocrisy. It is to show that the same institution can be, at once, a sincerely held cosmological obligation, a promotion system, a trade proposal, and the only enforcement an empire without soldiers had — and that a reader who insists on choosing one of those has thrown away the arithmetic.

A note on sources. The single extended quotation is from Hernando Alvarado Tezozómoc's *Crónica Mexicana* (composed 1598), quoted from the Spanish of the 1878 edition as reproduced in the scholarly literature, with a translation of my own; it is given at length because the wording is the evidence. The short phrases quoted from Diego Muñoz Camargo's *Historia de Tlaxcala* (1576–95) and from Bernal Díaz del Castillo are given in the published English renderings and are identified as such. Moctezuma II's reported answer to Andrés de Tapia (from Tapia's *Relación*), the Texcocan origin account in Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, Sahagún's statement of why enemy rulers were brought to witness the sacrifices, and Durán's descriptions of the invitations to Ahuitzotl's coronation of 1486 and the temple rededication of 1487 are paraphrased from the sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century texts rather than quoted, since the available English versions are modern translations. All of these authors wrote after the conquest, most of them from indigenous testimony or lost pictorial originals, and Durán, Tezozómoc and the *Codex Ramírez* appear to descend from a common lost source and cannot be used to corroborate one another.

Figures are given as the sources give them and the sources disagree, in some cases by half. The Triple Alliance dead in the Tarascan campaign of about 1478 are 20,900 in Durán and 31,800 in Tezozómoc; the losses in the engagements of about 1506 are 8,200 in Durán and 10,000 in Tezozómoc, with Alva Ixtlilxóchitl giving 2,800 for what may be the same fighting; Durán's hundred thousand for the army at Atlixco in about 1503 is very probably inflated. The reign dates of the Mexica rulers differ between every major chronicle. The count of twenty *telpochcalli* in Tenochtitlan and the estimate of the youths in each are reconstructions from the sixteenth-century material rather than a census.

Modern scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The reconstruction of Aztec logistics, mobilisation, march rates, supply by transit towns, arms and armour, the ranking system, and the argument that the empire ruled through the perception of power rather than through the presence of force is Ross Hassig's, in *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (1988) and *Trade, Tribute, and Transportation* (1985); his framing draws in turn on Edward Luttwak's distinction between force, which is consumed as it is used, and power, which is not. The argument that the Triple Alliance was unable rather than unwilling to conquer the Tlaxcala-Puebla valley, and the observation that nobles and commoners fought the same wars for different reasons, are Barry Isaac's. The distinction between tributary and strategic provinces, and the substantial revision of the older picture of a purely hegemonic empire, are from Berdan, Blanton, Boone, Hodge, Smith and Umberger's *Aztec Imperial Strategies* (1996); the archaeology of Oztuma is from the frontier fieldwork in northern Guerrero. Matthew Restall's correction of the claim that a preference for capture cost the Mexica the war of 1521 is credited where used. The *tlameme*'s load and daily stage are the standard figures from the same literature and are averages, not a rule.

PEOPLE OF LITTLE WORTH

Module 2 · The Settlement — who got what out of the victory of 1428; an order with no statute, no register, no title deed and no court, which performed by means of a remembered bargain the exact work that a legal instrument performs elsewhere, and divided the spoils of a war fought by everybody among the few who had led it

Every other case in this collection distributes its conquered wealth through a document. There is a charter, an ordinance, an agreement with a printed English text declared binding, a *sénatus-consulte*, a register of estates. The framework's discipline at this module is to name that document as the conquest's primary fiction before hunting the doctrine built on top of it, and to ask what the instrument converted — a relation into a thing, an occupation into a vacancy, a subsistence household into a wage-earning one.

Central Mexico had painted books, and it kept extraordinarily detailed records of land: sixteenth-century Nahuatl documents from the Texcoco region track parcels by category and by previous holder with a precision that would satisfy a notary. What it did not have was a statute. There was no instrument that declared land to be a thing, no court in which a title could be pleaded against the man who granted it, and no legislature whose enactment could be quoted back at a ruler. So the framework's question has to be asked in a different form, and the form it takes here turns out to be the module's finding: **an order with no writing does not lack a settlement fiction. It lodges the fiction in a story instead — and a story cannot be amended, because there is no text.**

The story survives, at length, in Diego Durán's *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España*, written in the 1570s and 1580s from Nahua informants and from a lost pictorial chronicle. It concerns what the Mexica nobility and the Mexica commoners are said to have agreed between themselves in the days before the army marched on Azcapotzalco.

The bargain before the battle

Durán's account has the common people of Tenochtitlan terrified. They see the strength of the Tepanecs, judge the war unwinnable, press the ruler and the lords for

peace, and finally ask to be allowed to leave the city. Itzcoatl reassures them. Then the exchange that the whole subsequent order rests on:

> *"Ellos replicaron: 'Y si no saliéredes con ello, ¿qué será de nosotros?' 'Si no saliéremos, que nuestras carnes sean mantenimiento vuestro y allí os venguéis de nosotros y nos comáis en tiestos quebrados y sucios, para que en todo nosotros y nuestras carnes sean infamemente tratadas.'*
> *Ellos respondieron: 'Pues mirad que así lo hemos de hacer y cumplir pues vosotros mismos os dais la sentencia. Y así nosotros nos obligamos, si salís con vuestro intento, de os servir y tributar y ser vuestros terrazgueros y de edificar vuestras casas y de os servir ... y de os dar nuestras hijas y hermanas y sobrinas para que os sirváis de ellas. Y cuando fuéredes a la guerra, de os llevar vuestras cargas y bastimiento y armas a cuestas y de os servir por todos los caminos por donde fuéredes y, finalmente, vendemos y sujetamos nuestras personas y bienes en vuestro servicio para siempre.'"*
> *"They replied: 'And if you do not succeed in it, what will become of us?' 'If we do not succeed, let our flesh be your sustenance, and there take your vengeance upon us and eat us out of broken and filthy potsherds, so that in every way we and our flesh may be shamefully treated.'*
> *They answered: 'Then see that we must do and fulfil it thus, since you yourselves pronounce the sentence. And so we bind ourselves, if you succeed in your intent, to serve you and pay you tribute and be your rent-paying tenants, and to build your houses and to serve you ... and to give you our daughters and sisters and nieces for your use. And when you go to war, to carry your loads and your provisions and your arms on our backs, and to serve you along all the roads you travel; and finally, we sell and subject our persons and our goods to your service for ever.'"*

The lords, Durán adds, seeing what the common people were offering and binding themselves to, accepted the arrangement, and took an oath of them that they would keep it, and they swore it.

Two cautions before this is used. The first is that Durán's transcription is ambiguous about which speech belongs to which party; the reading followed here — the commoners asking what becomes of them, the lords staking their own bodies to be eaten if the war is lost, the commoners then binding themselves to perpetual service if it is won — is the standard one in the literature, and the passage should be handled as a mutual wager in which each side names the price it will pay for failure. The second is more important. Almost certainly no such conversation occurred. The exchange is a set piece, of a kind common in these chronicles, and it belongs to the official version of the

past that was composed in Tenochtitlan after the victory — very likely in the same years and by the same hands that burned the older painted books.

That does not weaken it as evidence. It transforms what it is evidence *of*. A transcript would tell us what was said in 1428. A composed charter tells us what the men who ran the order needed the arrangement to have been — and what they needed was consent.

The distribution after it

The same source gives the distribution, and it is exact about the mechanism. The victorious lords return from Azcapotzalco with the wealth of the Tepanec court. They remind the common people of what they had bound themselves to. Then Tlacaelel goes to the ruler and makes the argument:

> *"Señor, estos señores, hermanos tuyos y primos tuyos, que con valor, ánimo y esfuerzo han puesto el pecho a la guerra, es bien sean galardonados. Ya sabes que nos prometieron los de Azcaputzalco tierras en donde pudiéramos hacer nuestras sementeras: no perdamos la coyuntura; vamos y repartamos la que nos señalaron entre nosotros, pues la ganamos con la fuerza de nuestro brazo."*
> *"My lord, these lords, your brothers and your cousins, who with valour, spirit and effort have put their breasts to the war — it is right that they be rewarded. You know that the men of Azcapotzalco promised us lands on which we might make our sowings: let us not lose the opportunity; let us go and divide among ourselves what they marked out for us, since we won it by the strength of our arm."*

Note the two warrants offered in a single breath: an old promise, and conquest. The ruler agreed, and ordered that the lords who had distinguished themselves in the war be counted, so that each might be rewarded according to his merits. And then:

> *"A la gente común que en esta guerra se halló, como a hombres cobardes y llenos de temor, que se habían juramentado de servir a los señores y vencedores ... no les quisieron dar tierras ni otra cosa alguna, salvo a los que mostraron algún corazón y brío y deseo de se mostrar. Y a todos los demás los echaron por ahí, como a gente de poco valor."*
> *"To the common people who were present at this war, as men cowardly and full of fear, who had sworn to serve the lords and victors ... they would give no lands nor anything else, save to those who had shown some heart and spirit and desire to prove themselves. And all the rest they cast aside, as people of little worth."*

That is the settlement of the Mexica empire, stated by the tradition of the men who made it, in the vocabulary they chose. The army that had just won the valley was told that it had lost the argument in advance.

What the instrument found

Before the victory, land in Tenochtitlan was held overwhelmingly by *calpolli*. The ward held the land; households received plots by allocation; the right ran for life and passed to children; and it lapsed if the plot lay uncultivated, in the usual reconstruction, for two years, at which point it returned for reallocation. This is not property in the sense a European instrument means. It is a man's standing in his ward expressed as access to soil, and it cannot be sold because selling it would mean selling his place among his neighbours.

Alongside it stood categories that were closer to estate: *tlatocatlalli*, the lands attached to the office of ruler; *tecpantlalli* and temple lands; and *pillalli*, the patrimonial land of nobles, held by inheritance and worked not by ward members but by *mayeque* — dependent cultivators attached to the estate, outside any *calpolli*, paying rent to the lord and exempt in return from the state's tribute. The *teccalli*, the lord-house, was the institution that held such an estate and the people on it together.

Two complications have to be held rather than smoothed. First, the categories are a sixteenth-century reconstruction of a fifteenth-century arrangement, recorded largely for Spanish administrative purposes by people with reasons to describe their own holdings favourably, and the boundaries between them were probably more fluid than any list suggests. Second, and more awkwardly for the framework's usual account, land in central Mexico could sometimes be bought: the Nahuatl records from the Texcoco region name *tlalcohualli*, purchased land, and describe procedures for sale that appear to predate the Spanish. So the standard colonial story — that the conquest's first act must be to convert an inalienable relation into an alienable thing, because otherwise there is nothing to grant — does not straightforwardly apply. Something that could be granted already existed.

What the victory of 1428 did was not to invent alienability. It was to move the boundary. Land that had been Tepanec office-land, Tepanec ward land and Tepanec noble estate around Azcapotzalco, Coyoacan and, after 1430, Xochimilco, passed to named Mexica lords as *pillalli* — and the people already on it passed with it, as *mayeque*, cultivators with a landlord and no ward. The conversion the Mexica settlement performed was not of land into a thing. It was **of a man with a place in a community into a man with a rent** — and the framework's discipline that the conversion is the act while the transfer is only its consequence applies exactly, with the

object of the conversion being the cultivator rather than the acre. The *mayeque* are the residue of the conquest, and it is the scholarly consensus that many of them were the conquered.

A fiction with no statute

The framework names three families of settlement fiction and asks which one a conqueror reaches for, on the ground that the choice tells you what he actually wanted. **Vacancy** declares the land empty, and its job is dispossession. **Recognition** declares that the grantee already owned what he is being given, and its job is binding an elite. **Divisibility** declares a collective holding partible into shares, and its job is manufacturing a market where none existed.

None of the three is what happened in Tenochtitlan in 1428, and the mismatch is instructive rather than a gap. The Mexica did not declare the Tepanec lands empty; everyone knew who farmed them. They did not tell the Mexica lords they had always owned them; the whole point of Tlacaelel's speech is that the lords had *won* them. And they did not divide a commons into saleable shares. What they did instead was to establish, in the authoritative account of the founding, that **the party who received nothing had agreed beforehand to receive nothing.**

This is a fourth family, and this study proposes it as an addition: **consent — declare that the subordinated party bound itself in advance, and the distribution becomes the performance of a contract rather than the taking of a share.** Its job is neither dispossession nor the binding of an elite but the *pre-emption of a claim*: it does not defend the settlement against a rival, it defends it against the people who fought for it.

Three properties make it worth naming separately. It concerns persons rather than things — the other three families are all fictions about land, and this one is a fiction about a relation, which is why it suits an order whose conquest converted people rather than acres. It requires no writing, which is why an order without statutes can run it and why it will be invisible to a method that hunts only for documents. And it is unfalsifiable by construction, because the agreement it asserts is located in the past.

That last property connects this module to the one before it. The framework observes that a decree presents itself as a decision and a law presents itself as a discovery. **A remembered pact presents itself as neither: it presents itself as a memory** — and a memory has no clause to repeal, no text to amend, no enacting authority still alive to be petitioned. The Mexica had already used this technique once, at a higher level, when they acquired their warrant to rule from a state that had been in ruins for two and a half centuries and could not therefore refuse them. They used it again, a generation

later, at the level of the domestic settlement. Both times the authority was placed somewhere it could not answer back. That is not two tricks. It is one habit, in a state that had no way to make an authority answer back to anybody.

And it has a cost, which the framework's guard rail requires be stated. Law that legitimates must genuinely constrain, and the reason colonial instruments contain real protections is that a fiction which delivers nothing stops working. A settlement lodged in a story constrains nobody at all. There was no forum in which a Mexica commoner could say that his ward's land had been taken contrary to the founding oath, because the founding oath ran entirely against him and there was nowhere to say it. The Mexica settlement is cheaper than a statute and weaker than one, in the same clause and for the same reason.

The consideration, and the clause that was not deleted

The framework's sharpest single question at this module is not what the grantee received but what he owed — because a grant purchasing armed service leaves a rival with a retinue, while a grant purchasing political compliance leaves a dependant with a title, and the second is far more stable.

The Mexica settlement is unambiguously the first kind. What the lords of Tenochtitlan received in 1428 was land, and what they were expected to supply was war. The estates were distributed by count of who had distinguished himself in the fighting; the men who received them were the officer corps; the ranks above *tequihuah* were military commands; the *tlacochcalcatl* and *tlacateccatl* who sat on the ruler's council were generals; and the whole promotion apparatus described in the previous module existed to identify and reward fighting men. Nothing in the arrangement separated the possession from the capacity for violence. Nobody was paid to stop being a warrior. The modern colonial move — hand a chief land, office and salary in exchange for tax collection and political compliance, while stripping his capacity for organised violence with the same government's other hand — was not available and was not attempted.

So the framework predicts the medieval failure mode, and it should be dated. The most direct instance is 1473, when Tlatelolco, the sister city on the same island under its own ruler Moquihuix, went to war with Tenochtitlan and lost, its ruler dying in the fighting. Beyond that lies the pattern of rulers removed by their own nobility — Tizoc, whose humiliation at Metztitlán around 1481 cost him the confidence of the nobles and who the chroniclers say was helped to die about five years later. An armed elite bound to the centre by grants it won with its own arm can also un-bind itself, and did.

The same clause runs, undeleted, through the settlement with the conquered. A town that submitted kept its ruling house, its lands, its schools and its warriors, and owed goods, passage and, when called, troops. The Triple Alliance did not disarm its tributaries and did not attempt to. Every arrangement it made left the other party holding the means to break it — at home, a noble class that was the army; abroad, sixty or more dynasties each with a muster of its own.

The default question, run down the chain

The framework's test of a settlement is to ask of every recipient, at every level: if this arrangement collapsed tomorrow, would this man be better or worse off? The answers, taken together, are the real constitution.

A Mexica lord: far worse. His estate, his *mayeque*, his exemption from tribute, his insignia and his office all come from the arrangement and have no existence outside it.

A *cuauhpilli*, a commoner ennobled by capture: worse, and with less to fall back on than the born noble, since he holds land he may not sell to a commoner and cannot settle tenants on, and a status the sources say was remembered as recent. He is the arrangement's most reliable defender because he has nowhere else to be.

An ordinary Mexica commoner: roughly unchanged, and there is the trouble. He pays tribute to his own lords, serves in the levy, carries the loads and builds the houses. What he draws from the empire is the chance of the ladder, the food that flows into the city, and the public works the reconstructions credit to these decades — the aqueduct from Chapultepec, the great dike across the lake, the causeways. Real benefits, and none of them a stake he would lose by a change of masters.

A subject town's *tlatoani*: **better.** He keeps his throne, his lands, his warriors and his people, and stops paying. He is the only man in the whole chain whose ledger improves if Tenochtitlan falls, and the arrangement was designed to leave him holding everything he would need to act on it.

A subject town's commoner: unchanged. He paid his own lord before the Mexica came and he will pay him afterwards; the imperial demand reaches him through a schedule his own ruler administers.

A *mayeque*: worse only marginally, and only because a landlord who loses his patron may become a harder landlord.

That audit is the empire's structure stated as arithmetic, and the framework's usual reassurance does not hold here. The default is supposed to mean that everyone with standing defends the whole because each is defending his own position. In this order the audit returns the opposite answer at exactly the level where the tribute was actually collected. Sixty or more men with thrones, armies and grievances each stood to gain by

the arrangement's end. What held them was not their stake in it but their estimate of the cost of testing it — which is to say the floor, and the floor's credibility, and nothing else.

The door, and the hinge on which it closed

One thing the settlement did keep open, and it is what the whole of Module 8 will have to weigh. Durán's account of the distribution contains an exception clause: the lords gave the commoners nothing, *save to those who had shown some heart and spirit and desire to prove themselves*. The men who fought conspicuously were paid. That exception is the *cuauhpipiltin* written into the founding moment — the valve by which a commoner could become a noble by capture, receive land, be freed from tribute and sit in the war council.

Its limits were set from the start and they were real: he could not settle tenants, could not sell to a commoner, and his origin was remembered, though his sons were nobles outright. And the door narrowed. Sumptuary law under Motecuhzoma I, on Durán's account and with Tlacaelel's advice, reserved fine cotton, featherwork and cacao to the nobility, which had the effect of preventing wealthy commoners and merchants from looking like nobles whatever they had earned. Then, on Motecuhzoma II's accession in 1502, the change that Hassig identifies as a deliberate reversal of the earlier meritocratic practice: commoners were barred from service in the royal palaces and from high office, and the divide between *pipiltin* and *macehualtin* was widened as policy.

Set that beside the founding story and the shape is complete. In 1428 the order told its commoners that they had agreed to serve for ever, and left one door open for the exceptional. In 1502 it closed the door. It is worth being precise about what that means in the framework's terms: an order that distributes renewable chances is measured by the cost of losing, and an order that stops distributing them has converted a class of men who could rise into a class of men who cannot. Seventeen years later a foreign faction landed on the coast.

Reading the settlement against the framework

The contribution this module makes is the fourth family, and it is offered for the card: **consent — the declaration that the subordinated party bound itself in advance.** Its job is the pre-emption of a claim by the people who won the war; it operates on a relation between persons rather than on land; it requires no writing, and is therefore invisible to a method that hunts only for statutes; and it is unfalsifiable by

construction, because the agreement it asserts sits in the past, where nobody can be cross-examined. **Look for it wherever a conquest has to be settled and the conqueror has no legislature** — and expect it to appear not as a document but as a founding story in which the losers speak first.

That compounds directly with what the valley already showed. An order which took its warrant to rule from a state dead for two and a half centuries, and its domestic settlement from a bargain that almost certainly never happened, was doing the same thing twice: placing the authority for an arrangement somewhere no living party could contradict it. The technique is cheap, it is durable against argument, and it has the defect that every cheap thing in this study has — it constrains nobody, so it protects nobody, so it earns nothing back. A statute that binds the powerful buys their subjects a reason to defend it. A story that binds only the weak buys nothing at all.

Two findings carry forward. The consideration in the Mexica grant was armed service, undeleted at every level of the hierarchy, which means the collection should expect from this order the failure mode of the medieval European settlement rather than the modern colonial one — and it should look for the first instance early, which is 1473 and Tlatelolco, not 1519. And the default audit returns *better off* at the level of the subject ruler, which is not a subtlety but the central fact about this empire: the men who actually delivered the tribute were the men with the most to gain from its ending, and the arrangement left every one of them armed.

One discipline in closing, because this module quotes a conquering elite calling the people who fought its war cowards and men of little worth, and the temptation is to read that as unusual cruelty. It is not unusual. It is the ordinary grammar of a settlement, stated with less embarrassment than most settlements manage because there was no metropolitan audience to embarrass. Every division of spoils has to explain why the people who did the fighting are not receiving the proceeds, and the explanations available are few: they were cowardly, they were unfree, they were not of the blood, they agreed. The Mexica used the last and dressed it in the first. What is genuinely remarkable in Durán's passage is not the contempt but the structure underneath it — that an order which could not write chose to lodge its constitution in a memory, and that this worked, for ninety years, on everybody except the men who were still holding their own weapons.

A note on sources. The three extended quotations are from Diego Durán's *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España y islas de Tierra Firme* (composed c. 1581), given in the Spanish of the standard edition as reproduced in the scholarly literature, with translations of my own; they are quoted at length because the wording is the evidence and paraphrase would conceal exactly what the passage is doing. Durán's transcription

does not make the attribution of the two speeches in the first passage unambiguous, and the reading adopted here — the lords staking their bodies, the commoners binding themselves to service — is the standard one and is flagged as such. Durán, Alvarado Tezozómoc's *Crónica Mexicana* and the *Codex Ramírez* appear to descend from a common lost chronicle and cannot be used to corroborate one another. The pre-battle bargain is very probably a composition of the post-1428 official history rather than a record of anything said; the reading offered here treats it as evidence of what the settlement needed to have been, which is what it can bear.

The Nahuatl land categories — *calpollalli*, *tlatocatlalli*, *tecpantlalli*, *pillalli*, *tlalcohualli* — and the institutions of the *teccalli* and the *mayeque* are given as the sixteenth-century Nahuatl-language records and the modern literature on them describe them, with the caveat stated in the text that these are colonial-era reconstructions of a pre-conquest arrangement and that the boundaries were probably less tidy than the vocabulary. The existence of purchased land and of pre-conquest procedures for sale in the Texcoco region is reported because it complicates the framework's usual account and should not be smoothed away. The two-year lapse rule for uncultivated ward land is the standard reconstruction.

Modern scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The interpretation of the pre-battle pact as part of the official rewriting of Mexica history, and its function in justifying the concentration of land and office after 1428, follows the reading developed by Geoffrey Conrad and Arthur Demarest in *Religion and Empire* and by later commentators working from the same passage. Motecuhzoma II's exclusion of commoners from palace service and high office, and its character as a reversal of earlier practice, is Ross Hassig's (*Aztec Warfare*, 1988). The public works of the Itzcoatl and Motecuhzoma I decades — the Chapultepec aqueduct, the dike, the causeways — are drawn from Alva Ixtlilxóchitl and the modern reconstructions of them. Tlatelolco's war with Tenochtitlan in 1473 and the death of Moquihuix, and the removal of Tizoc some five years after the Metztitlán reverse, are as the chronicles give them and the dates vary between sources. Figures for the personal domains of individual rulers circulate in the literature and have been left out here rather than reproduced, since they cannot be checked.

THE SAME HEIGHT AS THE RAIN

Module 3 · The Robe — the story the order told about itself: a debt owed to the sun, paid in blood, by a people chosen to pay it; a doctrine broadcast with enormous expense and real constraint to the men of one city, never once offered to the millions it ruled, and answered in the provinces not by conversion but by the confiscation of their gods

The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan — *huei teocalli* — was rebuilt at least seven times between the founding and 1519, each ruler enlarging what his predecessor had raised, until the final structure stood something over forty-five metres and dominated a walled precinct running some three hundred and sixty metres on a side which may have contained as many as seventy-eight buildings. It was not one pyramid. It was two, rising side by side on a single platform, with two flights of steps climbing the western face in parallel to two shrines at the top.

The northern shrine belonged to Tlaloc, and its side of the mountain was Tonacatepetl, the Hill of Sustenance. Tlaloc is one of the oldest gods in Mesoamerica: rain, storm, the mountains where the water is kept, the crop. He had been worshipped in the valley since Teotihuacan and probably long before, under one name or another, by everyone.

The southern shrine belonged to Huitzilopochtli, and its side was Coatepec, the Serpent Mountain, where in the story he was born already armed to his mother's defence and destroyed his sister the moon and his four hundred brothers the stars of the south. Huitzilopochtli was nobody's god but the Mexica's. He had no ancient shrine, no presence at Teotihuacan or Tula, no worshippers in Texcoco or Chalco or Xochimilco or anywhere else at all. He was the tribal fetish of a people who had arrived last, been chased off Chapultepec, taken service on bad ground at Culhuacan, and settled a rock in a salt lake.

The robe of this order is legible in that architecture before a word of doctrine is quoted. The Mexica put their own patron on the same platform, at the same height, with a staircase of his own, beside the god of the rain that everybody in central Mexico had always needed. Not above him — the framework's caution about a doctrine that claims too much applies, and the Mexica did not make that mistake. Beside him. The claim being asserted in stone was parity with the universal: that what this one people carried was not a local cult but a cosmic necessity of the same order as water falling on maize.

The debt

The doctrine that supported the claim was not invented in Tenochtitlan. Central Mexico had held for centuries that the world was in its fifth age, the four previous suns having ended in destruction; that the present sun had been made at Teotihuacan when gods threw themselves into a fire; and that human beings existed because gods had bled and done penance for them. The Mexica took a shared cosmology and gave it a bill and a debtor.

The key word is *nextlahualli* — payment, the settling of a debt — and it is the term the sources and the archaeologists both use for the victims. The logic runs: the gods destroyed themselves to make the sun move and to make people; what was given must be returned; the sun is not a fixture but a thing being maintained, and it is maintained with human blood; the maintenance is continuous, and therefore war is continuous, because war is where the payment comes from. Failure was not impiety in the abstract. It was default, and default meant the sun stopping.

The vocabulary carried the theology down into ordinary speech, exactly as the valley's older conquest had left its name in the word for a craftsman. *Macehualli* — the everyday word for a commoner, the word for the ninety-odd per cent — was understood in the tradition to mean those who had been deserved, merited, obtained by the gods' penance: the beings for whom gods had bled. One caution, because it matters and the popular literature usually omits it. Frances Karttunen's dictionary distinguishes *mācēhualli*, the commoner, from *mahcēhualli*, merit or recompense, as separate words with different vowel and glottal structure; the theological etymology is very likely a folk one. That does not make it unimportant. It makes it a doctrine so thoroughly settled that people heard it in a word where a linguist says it is not — which is precisely what a robe that has taken sounds like from the inside.

A related correction belongs here, to the Landscape's reading of the passage on the burning of the histories. That passage pairs *in tlilli, in tlapalli*, the black ink and the red, with *in tlatconi, in tlamamaloni*, the thing carried and the thing borne. The translators render the second couplet as government; but Sahagún's own collection of Nahuatl proverbs glosses the paired verbs — *in itconi, in mamaloni*, borne on the arm and on the back, carried in the fold of the mantle — as a saying used of the common people, the subjects. The couplet names the carried, not the carriers. Itzcoatl's council was not saying that the record and the office of rule belong in few hands. It was saying that the record should be kept from *the people who are carried*, which is a harder sentence and a more exact one.

Who could actually hear it

The framework's audience test asks who was in a position to receive a doctrine, since a robe addressed to people who never encountered it is not a robe at all.

Inside Tenochtitlan the answer is: everyone, constantly, at very great expense. The precinct stood at the centre of the city and the temple was visible from every quarter of it. The ritual calendar filled eighteen twenty-day months with public festivals, and the sources describe them as crowded popular occasions. Every ward ran a school, and the schools taught the doctrine along with the weapons: the *calmecac* taught the songs, the calendar, the count of years and the painted books, and its students drew their own blood daily to offer; the *telpochcalli* youths sang and danced nightly until past midnight. There was a house of song for teaching the hymns. The rulers of the three capitals performed penance and autosacrifice in person; soldiers cut their ears, tongues and limbs before marching. The doctrine was not a court theology. It was saturating, participatory, and paid for in the population's own blood on an ordinary weekday.

Outside the valley the answer is: essentially nobody. No missionary went from Tenochtitlan to the Huaxteca. No school was opened in a tributary province to teach a subject population the Mexica account of the sun. There was no catechism, no clergy posted among the conquered, no requirement that a defeated town adopt Huitzilopochtli or abandon its own gods, and no machinery of any kind for producing belief in the people from whom the tribute actually came. The glyph for a conquered town in the codices is a temple with its roof toppled and burning — and what that records is a humiliation, not a conversion. The building was thrown down. The god was not replaced.

The gods in the barred room

What the Mexica did instead is the most revealing single institution in this study, and it is the exact inverse of what every colonial case in this collection does.

In the sacred precinct stood a building the sources call *Coacalco* or *Coateocalli*. Sahagún describes it in his Spanish text:

> *"era una sala enrejada como cárcel; en ella tenían encerrados a todos los dioses de los pueblos que habían tomado por guerra; teníanlos allí como cautivos."*
> *"it was a room latticed with bars like a jail; in it they kept shut up all the gods of the peoples they had taken in war; they held them there as captives."*

Durán calls the same building the house of the various gods. When the Triple Alliance took a town, it took the town's deity — the image, and with it the sacred

bundle in which the god's presence was understood actually to reside — and brought it back to the capital, where it was housed under lock. On some occasions the priesthood of the defeated god was brought too, to serve it in Tenochtitlan. After the conquest of the Toluca valley in the 1490s a temple was raised in Tenochtitlan for the god of the beaten Matlatzinca, where he received sacrifices.

Read the instrument for what it is. These were not trophies and not works of art; in the understanding of the people who took them they were living gods whose identity was bound to the communities they came from, and holding them was holding a surety for the community's behaviour. It is the same technique as a hostage in a royal household, applied to the divine. And its direction is the point: **the flow was inward.** Rome sent a cult out; Spain sent friars out; France sent schools and a civilising mission out; Britain sent chaplains and an English curriculum out. Tenochtitlan sent nothing out and brought the provinces' gods in.

That is not tolerance, though it produced something a modern reader might mistake for it, and the sixteenth-century friars certainly noticed the difference — Motolinía was appalled to find images of the Virgin set up beside idols by people for whom adding a god was the natural response to a new power. It is a decision about whose belief the order required. **An order that imports its subjects' gods rather than exporting its own has concluded that its subjects' conviction is not needed.** That conclusion arrives here from the theology; Module 1 reached the identical conclusion from the absence of garrisons, and the two roads meeting is worth more than either alone.

What it cost the men who wore it

The framework's revealed-preference test asks whether the apex paid real, avoidable costs for the doctrine, and whether the doctrine constrained him or merely justified him. On both counts the Mexica robe passes, and passes hard — which is why any reading of it as cynical stagecraft fails on the evidence.

It cost, first, in construction. Seven enlargements of the Great Temple, each a major public work in a city without draught animals, where the stone had to be quarried, floated and carried; and the second temple's requirements were the direct cause of the war on Xochimilco in 1430. It cost in war, since the campaigns that produced captives also produced casualties in the tens of thousands, and no reading of the Tarascan disaster of 1478 or the rout at Atlixco in 1503 can make those wars look like a good trade for anything except what the doctrine said they were for. It cost in bodies, and the payment was not confined to foreigners: the archaeology of the Huei Tzompantli, the great skull rack excavated beside the Templo Mayor from 2015 onward, has produced

more than six hundred crania to date, dated approximately to 1486–1502, and the finds include women and children, which the excavators had not expected.

And it constrained. A new *tlatoani*'s accession was not complete until he had led a campaign and brought back captives; the coronation was conditional on a military performance that could fail, and failure was punished. Tizoc's humiliation at Metztitlán around 1481 cost him the confidence of his nobility and, on the chronicles' account, his life about five years later. Rulers fasted, did penance and drew their own blood. Nobles were punished more severely than commoners for the same offences — a rule that is the exact signature of a doctrine which genuinely binds its own elite rather than merely licensing it. The framework holds that a story capable of legitimating must also be capable of condemning, and that the constraint is what the legitimacy is bought with. Here the constraint is documented, dated, and occasionally fatal to the man at the top.

The buying, however, was bounded. What the doctrine purchased was the compliance of the Mexica — their willingness to be levied, to carry, to build, to fight and to die, in a city whose commoners had been told at the founding that they were men of little worth. That is an enormous purchase and it explains the ninety years. It purchased nothing at all in Cuetlaxtlan or Coixtlahuaca or Tepeacac, because it was never offered there. **A robe's binding force is bounded by the audience it was cut for** — it can bind that audience absolutely and remain, twenty days' march away, simply unheard.

The only ones who died

Which brings the module to the place where the doctrine has to be tested against practice, and where it fails in the most specific way available.

The teaching was that the sun required the best: the *nextlahualli* was to be a warrior, taken in fair fight, and the noblest captives were the most valuable — the whole promotion ladder of Module 1 graded a man by the quality of the enemies he brought back, with a captive from Atlixco or Huexotzinco worth more than ten Huaxtecs. Death on the stone was *xochimiquiztli*, flowery death, and it was said to carry the dead man to the sun's company, which is the highest thing the cosmology offered.

Now set beside it a flat sentence from Chimalpahin, the Nahua annalist of Chalco Amaquemecan, writing in the early seventeenth century from his own town's records about the wars between Chalco and the Mexica:

> *"yn quimacia yn Mexica pipiltin, çan oc quincahuaya yn Chalca, auh no yhui yn quimacia yn Chalca pipiltin, çan oc quincahuaya yn Mexica, ca çan ic ynceltin yn macehualtin yn miquia."*
> *"When they captured Mexica nobles, the Chalca simply let them go; and likewise when they captured Chalca nobles, the Mexica let them go; so that the commoners were the only ones who died."*

That is a member of the Nahua nobility recording, without visible embarrassment, that the sacred demand which justified a century of warfare was, at the decisive moment, waived for men of his own class on both sides. The nobles were exchanged. The *macehualtin* were killed.

It should be handled carefully. Chimalpahin is describing a particular long war between two neighbouring powers, both Nahua, both with elites who intermarried and knew each other, and it would be wrong to generalise it into a universal rule for every campaign of the empire — captives from Atlixco whose rank raised a Mexica warrior to *tlacateccatl* were presumably not all commoners, and the tradition of the gladiatorial sacrifice of distinguished enemies is well attested. But it does not have to be universal to be decisive. It only has to be true sometimes, among the people best placed to know, and recorded by one of them as ordinary practice.

Put it beside the settlement of Module 2 and the shape is complete. The lords of Tenochtitlan told their commoners that they had agreed in advance to serve for ever, and cast the rest aside as men of little worth. Then the order's holiest obligation, the debt on which the sun itself depended, was collected — when the collector had the choice — from the same men. **The framework predicts extraction sorted by caste. This order sorted its sacrament by caste**, and that is a sharper failure than sorting a tribute schedule, because the doctrine's entire claim on the Mexica commoner was that the payment was a supreme honour.

The architect who may not have existed

The tradition assigns the design of all this to one man: Tlacaelel, brother or half-brother of Motecuhzoma I, *cihuacoatl* and counsellor across four reigns, credited with the burning of the histories, the elevation of Huitzilopochtli, the doctrine of feeding the sun, the sumptuary laws and the institution of the flower wars — a kingmaker who never took the throne.

Two things should be said. Tlacaelel comes to us almost entirely through Durán, Alvarado Tezozómoc and the *Codex Ramírez*, which descend from a common lost chronicle and are therefore one source wearing three coats, not three witnesses. And

Susan Gillespie's work on the Mexica dynastic histories, which reoriented the field, argues that these traditions are substantially non-literal — recast by their sixteenth-century recorders inside a cyclical conception of time, and reshaped again to make sense of the conquest — so that a figure who tidily explains the entire imperial ideology is exactly the kind of figure such a tradition would produce.

The methodological consequence is a relief rather than a loss, and it is the reason this study reads positions rather than designs. **A robe does not need an architect.** It needs a sequence of men in positions, each solving the problem in front of him with the materials to hand: a ruler on an island who has just taken the valley and needs a past that matches, who burns the books; his successor, who has to justify permanent war to the men who fight it, and finds a cosmology already lying about in which the sun runs on blood; a third, facing four years of frost and famine from 1450, whose priests conclude that the debt has been underpaid; a fourth, who needs foreign kings to be frightened, and invites them to watch. None of them had to invent anything. Each of them reached for the nearest available material, and the accumulated result looks so much like a design that the tradition eventually supplied a designer.

Reading the robe against the framework

The framework's colonial prediction is a **reversed robe**: cut for the metropole and the army whose belief funds and mans the conquest, not for the conquered, whose belief the floor does not need. The Mexica case is the same finding without the geography that produced the name — there was no metropole and no colony, only a capital and a periphery reached by a marching column — and it therefore states the underlying rule more plainly than any of the European cases can. **The robe is cut for whoever must be persuaded to bear the cost of the conquest, and for nobody else.** In Algeria that was Paris. Here it was the men of Tenochtitlan, who supplied the army out of their own households, and the doctrine was aimed at them with a saturating intensity — schools, songs, calendar, festivals, their own blood weekly — that no European colonial power ever directed at its own metropolitan population.

To that this module adds an instrument the collection has not previously had to name. Where an order does not need its subjects' belief, it will not merely decline to export a doctrine; if it can, it will run the traffic backwards. The Mexica *coacalco* is the anti-mission: a barred room in the capital holding the gods of the conquered as captives, and, when a province was important enough, a temple raised in Tenochtitlan for the beaten people's god so that he might receive offerings there instead of at home. **Import of the subject's gods is the diagnostic of an order that has decided the subject's conviction is unnecessary, as export of the ruler's god is the diagnostic of**

an order that has decided it is essential. Where a study finds the traffic running inward, it should expect to find — as this one does — no garrisons, no formation, no conversion, and a floor that runs on the memory of violence.

Two further findings compound with what came before.

The first is that the constraint test passes and the legitimacy it buys is nonetheless local. This robe genuinely bound its apex: the coronation contingent on captives, the penance, the harsher law for nobles, a ruler removed after a defeat. The framework's rule that constraint is what legitimacy is bought with holds exactly — and the purchase covered one city and its allies, because the audience was one city and its allies. An order can therefore run a fully functioning, genuinely binding, expensively maintained legitimacy over a population of a hundred thousand while ruling several million people to whom it has never once explained itself. That is not a contradiction. It is the normal condition of an empire that does not need the majority's belief, and it is why such empires look, from the outside, both intensely ideological and completely hollow.

The second is the caste sorting, and it is the one to carry into Module 6. Chimalpahin's sentence is the most damaging line in the corpus for the order's own account of itself, and it damages that account in the framework's own terms: a doctrine that promises the highest honour to the man who pays, and then routes the payment away from the class that preaches it, has converted a sacrament into a tax. What the flower wars minted for a Mexica noble was a promotion. What they cost a Mexica commoner was his body. Both of those were true at once and the doctrine covered both with the same word.

One discipline in closing, because this module has handled the deaths of a very large number of people and the temptation runs two ways. It is not the case that the sacrifice was invented by Spanish propagandists: the skull rack is in the ground, it has been excavated, and it contains men, women and children. It is also not the case that the numbers can be taken as the chroniclers give them: Durán's 80,400 for the rededication of the Great Temple in 1487 would require some eight hundred killings an hour without pause for four days, while the informants behind the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* gave about four thousand for the same occasion, and Andrés de Tapia's count of over a hundred and thirty thousand skulls on the rack is a soldier's estimate of a structure he saw once. The honest position is that the practice was real, continuous, central, and of a scale that cannot presently be fixed within an order of magnitude. And explaining the logic — the debt, the fifth sun, the position of a ruler who needed permanent war and found a cosmology that required it — is not a defence of what the logic produced. Legibility is not pardon. What it buys is the ability to see that the

people who did this were not aliens; they were men in positions, reaching for what was near, and the thing nearest to hand was a story their grandparents had already believed.

A note on sources. The two extended quotations are primary and are given in the original with translations of my own: Sahagún's Spanish description of the *Coacalco* (*Historia general*, Book 2, Appendix), and Chimalpahin's Nahuatl on the fate of captured nobles and commoners in the Chalco wars (*Relaciones*, early seventeenth century). Both authors wrote after the conquest — Sahagún compiling indigenous testimony for the purpose of identifying idolatry, Chimalpahin a Nahua nobleman of Chalco working from his own town's records with his own town's interests. The Chalco passage describes one long regional war and is not generalised here into a universal rule; it is used for what it can bear, which is that the practice existed and was recorded as ordinary by a man of the class it spared.

The gloss of *in itconi, in mamaloni* as a saying used of the common people is from the collection of Nahuatl proverbs and metaphors gathered by Sahagún and published in translation by Thelma Sullivan; it is used here to refine the reading of the same couplet offered in this study's Landscape module. The distinction between *mācēhualli* (commoner) and *mahcēhualli* (merit, recompense) is Frances Karttunen's, in *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl*, and is given because it undercuts a very widely repeated etymology; the folk understanding is reported as a folk understanding. *Nextlahualli* as the term for the sacrificial payment is used by the sources and by the excavators of the Templo Mayor.

Figures are given as ranges and the ranges are wide. For the rededication of 1487, Durán gives 80,400 and the informants behind the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* about 4,000; the higher figure has been shown implausible on simple arithmetic grounds. Andrés de Tapia's count of the skull rack is variously reported at around 136,000. The Huei Tzompantli excavations conducted by the Programa de Arqueología Urbana under Raúl Barrera Rodríguez from 2015 onward had produced 484 crania by 2017 and over 600 by late 2020, dated approximately 1486–1502, including women and children. The dimensions and building phases of the Templo Mayor and its precinct are from the Templo Mayor Project and vary by source; the final height is given between roughly 45 and 60 metres in different reconstructions.

Modern scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The interpretation of the Templo Mayor as a dual sacred mountain, Tonacatepetl and Coatepec, is Eduardo Matos Moctezuma's and the Templo Mayor Project's, with the later work of Leonardo López Luján and Alfredo López Austin. The reading of the *coacalco*'s captured deities as sureties for the conquered communities' behaviour rather than as trophies follows Richard Townsend, Emily Umberger and the recent literature on the Templo Mayor's

collections. The argument that Mexica dynastic history is substantially non-literal, and the consequent caution about Tlacaelel — who is known essentially only through the interdependent *Crónica X* group of Durán, Alvarado Tezozómoc and the *Codex Ramírez* — is Susan Gillespie's, in *The Aztec Kings*. The account of the *calmecac* and *telpochcalli* curricula follows Ross Hassig and the standard treatments of the sacred precinct.

THE CORD BURIED ON A BATTLEFIELD

Module 4 · Formation — an order that formed its own population more completely than any other state of its age, beginning at the cutting of the umbilical cord and running through compulsory schools in every ward for both sexes and both classes; and which offered not one hour of that apparatus to the millions it ruled, for a reason sharper than unwillingness

Formation in Tenochtitlan began before the child had been fed.

The midwife cut the cord and spoke to the newborn, and the speeches are preserved — Book Six of the Florentine Codex is given over almost entirely to this material, the *huehuetlatolli*, the speech of the elders: the words for a pregnant woman, the words at the birth, the words to a boy and the words to a girl, the words a father says to his daughter, the words a ruler says on taking office. To a boy the midwife said that this house was only his cradle, his place of arrival, the resting place of his head; that his true belonging lay elsewhere; and, in the published translation, that *"thou belongest out there; out there hast thou been consecrated"* — sent into war, war being his desert and his task, his charge to give the sun the enemy's blood to drink and to feed the earth with the enemy's body. To a girl she said that the house *was* her place, that she belonged to the hearth as the ashes belong to it, and that she would not go out.

Then the cords were disposed of, and the disposal was the doctrine made physical. A girl's was buried by the hearth. A boy's was given to warriors to carry into enemy country and bury on ground where fighting was done.

There is no more compact statement of what formation means than that. Within an hour of birth, the child had been told what it was for, in a formula, by a professional, in front of witnesses; and a piece of its body had been physically deposited at the place where its life was supposed to end. Everything the framework wants to know about a formation apparatus — what it produces, whom it addresses, whether it reaches everybody — is already answerable from this rite before a single school is described.

Rations, thorns, and a schedule of childhood

The state's own picture of what happened next survives in pictures. The third section of the Codex Mendoza runs a year-by-year account of the raising of a child from three to fifteen, in registers read across for age and down for sex, and it is one of

the most extraordinary documents of childhood produced anywhere before the modern era.

Food is rationed by age and the ration is drawn: half a tortilla at three, one at four and five, one and a half through the middle years, two at thirteen and fourteen. Tasks are graded upward — at four the boy fetches water and the girl is shown the spindle; at five he carries light loads of wood and she begins to spin; by fourteen he is fishing from a canoe and moving cargo, she is weaving complex cloth and grinding maize. And the punishments are drawn with the same matter-of-factness as the tortillas: children who ignore instruction are threatened with maguey thorns; then a girl's wrist is pierced with one and a boy is pierced in the neck, flank and hip and bound at wrists and ankles; then the beating with a stick; and at eleven, both sexes are held over a fire of chillies and made to breathe the smoke. In every panel the children are drawn weeping.

Two cautions. The Codex Mendoza was made around 1541 by Nahua artists and scribes working under Spanish supervision, to show the Emperor Charles V what the Mexica state had been; it is an account of a vanished order produced for a conqueror, and its tidiness is partly an artefact of that. And a normative schedule is not a description of behaviour — the same manuscript that shows the thorns also shows a system of graduated food rations that implies a household attending closely to a child's growth, and Book Six is full of tenderness, the newborn addressed as a precious feather, a green stone, a bracelet. Both things were true. What can be taken from the document with confidence is that the Mexica conceived of the raising of a child as a *curriculum* — sequenced, calibrated, publicly known, and enforced — and that they thought this worth explaining to a foreign emperor as the thing that had made them what they were.

Every ward had a school

At about fifteen the boy left the household for an institution, and here the Mexica arrangement becomes genuinely unusual in world terms.

Every *calpolli* maintained a *telpochcalli*, the house of youths — some twenty of them in Tenochtitlan at the end, each holding on the reconstructions four to five hundred and fifty boys. The parents handed the child over in a formal ceremony: the schoolmasters were invited, fed, given gifts, and took the boy in their arms, and the parents said in the set formula that they did not know how to raise him and were giving him away. He was dedicated to Tezcatlipoca. He slept at the school, swept it, laid its fires, cut himself for blood offerings, sang and danced at the house of song until past midnight, and went out on campaign as a veteran's shield-bearer to carry the man's weapons and lose his fear.

Alongside it stood the *calmecac*, the house attached to the temples — Dibble and Anderson render the name as the priests' house or house of penance — which took boys earlier and taught a wholly different syllabus: the songs, the ritual calendar, the count of years, the painted books, rhetoric, law, the interpretation of dreams and day-signs, along with the military training the other school gave. Its discipline was harsher: fasting, night vigils, self-mortification, daily bloodletting, and severe punishment for failure — students of one temple who neglected their duties were taken to the marshes, beaten and held under water until nearly drowned.

The division corresponds to class, but it was not a wall, and the point at which it was permeable is the point that matters. The *calmecac* was principally for the sons of nobles; but merchants' sons entered it, and Sahagún's informants describe the choice of school as one the parents made, with a ceremony to mark it, so that a commoner family with an exceptional child had a door. Girls were schooled too — in the household arts, in the ritual calendar, in song and dance at the *cuicacalli*, and, for the ones selected, in midwifery, which carried a full healer's training and considerable standing.

Whether this amounts to compulsory universal education in the modern sense is a question that should be handled carefully, because the claim circulates in a stronger form than the evidence supports. What the sources describe is an expectation, universally stated, that every boy would be handed to one school or the other, and an institutional capacity in Tenochtitlan large enough to make that plausible for the capital. Whether it held in every tributary village of the valley, or for slaves, or in practice as opposed to in the normative literature, is not knowable from what survives. The honest formulation is that the Mexica intended and largely achieved something no European state of the fifteenth century attempted: the institutional formation of an entire free male population, and a good deal of the female one, by the state and its wards rather than by a family or a church alone.

What the vocabulary shows

For the third time in this study, the decisive evidence sits in the language rather than in an event.

The Nahua terms for education are not terms for instruction. One is *tlacahuapahualiztli*, which is built on the verb for raising or strengthening and means something like the art of bringing up men. The other is *neixtlamachiliztli*, the giving of wisdom to the face. And the goal is stated in one of the paired couplets in which Nahuatl handles large abstractions: *in ixtli, in yollotl*, the face and the heart — a difrasismo the lexicographers gloss as the human person, and which the tradition uses for what we would call character.

A child, in this conception, arrives without a face. The teacher's work is to give it one. The passage from the Códice Matritense describing the *tlamatini*, the sage, says exactly this: that his are the black ink and the red, that he is a light and a mirror and a road for others, that he makes wise the faces of others, that he gives them a face and leads them to develop it. To be formed is to acquire a countenance; to be unformed is to have none.

Set that beside the two earlier findings of the same kind. *Toltecatl*, the name of a vanished conquest state, had become the ordinary word for a skilled craftsman. *Macehualli*, the word for a commoner, was heard by its speakers as meaning those for whom the gods had done penance. And now the word for education means the giving of a face. In each case the order's central claim had settled below the level of argument into the level of vocabulary, where it could not be disputed because it was not being asserted. That is what the framework means by an order becoming the furniture of reality, and the Mexica case shows it happening three times in three different registers within a single century.

What it was for

The framework's sharpest question at this module is not how much formation was supplied but what kind: whether the schooling gave a man tools he could use for his own purposes, including against the order that trained him, or whether it fitted him precisely to a slot and no further.

The Mexica ran both kinds, in two buildings, and the difference between them is the settlement of Module 2 expressed as a syllabus. The *telpochcalli* produced a warrior and a labourer: weapons, endurance, public works, songs, obedience to military and religious authority. The *calmecac* produced a man who could read the painted books, keep the calendar, argue a case, conduct a ritual and hold an office. Writing, reckoning and the law — the tools that are portable, that confer standing independent of the man who granted it — were taught in the school that was principally for nobles. The tools that are not portable were taught in the school that was for everyone else.

The door between them was real, and so was its narrowness. A commoner's son could be dedicated to the *calmecac*; a commoner could rise by capture to *cuauhpilli* and sit on the war council. But the ladder available to the ordinary Mexica boy ran through the taking of prisoners, which is to say through the one skill whose exercise required the state to keep sending him to war. The formation his order gave him was very thorough and it was calibrated to make him need the order — and here the framework's usual guard rail applies with full force, because the arrangement was not therefore fraudulent. It delivered. Men did rise; the *cuauhpipiltin* existed and held land and sat in

council; the framework holds that a chance which is real for a few is not thereby a lie for the many, and this one was real. It was simply narrow, and it narrowed further, and by 1502 Motecuhzoma II had shut the palace door entirely.

And in the provinces, nothing

Now the other half, and it is a silence so complete that it takes an effort to notice it.

The Triple Alliance ruled, at its greatest extent, something in the order of five to six million people across some thirty-eight tributary provinces from the Gulf to the Pacific. For those people it built no schools. It sent no teachers. It established no *telpochcalli* in Cuetlaxtlan and no *calmecac* in Coixtlahuaca. It did not impose its calendar, its patron, its history or its law. It did not require a subject people to learn Nahuatl, and it did not offer to teach it. There was no examination, no qualification, no certificate of any kind that a Totonac or a Mixtec or a Huaxtec could obtain, and no office in the imperial structure that obtaining one would have opened.

Nahuatl did spread across Mesoamerica in these years, and the manner of its spreading is the proof rather than the exception. It travelled as the language of the long-distance merchants and of tribute accounting — a convenience, adopted by people who found it useful for dealing with the people who came to collect. The clearest evidence of this is what happened afterwards: the Spanish, arriving in 1519, found Nahuatl so widely serviceable as a vehicular language that they adopted it themselves as an administrative medium across New Spain, and the enormous body of colonial-era Nahuatl documentation exists because of it. A language that spreads by usefulness and survives its state's destruction was never being imposed. It was being found convenient.

Meanwhile Otomi, Matlatzinca, Totonac, Huaxtec, Mixtec, Zapotec, Chinantec, Mazatec, Tlapanec and Purépecha continued to be spoken, and the peoples who spoke them continued to keep their own gods, their own annals, their own dynasties and their own festivals. Chimalpahin, whose flat sentence about who died in the wars gave the last module its hardest evidence, was writing the history of Chalco Amaquemecan from Chalco's own records in the seventeenth century — a full century after the Mexica empire had ceased to exist, in a tradition that had never stopped being local.

Why not: a sharper answer than unwillingness

The framework's colonial prediction is that formation is withheld from the majority because forming them would mean admitting them: an educated subject can read the law he is being governed under, and every school opened is a claim deferred. That is the

right shape, and it explains Algeria and Vietnam and Buganda. Applied here it is not quite right, and the way it fails is this module's contribution.

The Mexica did not withhold formation from their subjects out of a fear that formation would generate claims. **They withheld it because there was nothing to admit anybody to.** The order had no membership category. Rome had *civis*, a status a Gaul could acquire, which is why Rome eventually had Gallic senators and a Spanish emperor. France had *sujet* and *évolué* and a naturalisation procedure, however cynically administered. Britain had the imperial subject and the mission school, however hedged. Tenochtitlan had *Mexica*, which was a birth; it had allies, which were cities; and it had tributaries, which were schedules. There was no third thing. No status existed that a conquered man could acquire, no office in the imperial apparatus that a Huaxtec could hold, no oath he could swear, no rank the promotion ladder could confer on him — the ladder of Module 1 counted captives taken *for* Tenochtitlan by men *of* Tenochtitlan and had no rung for anyone else. A subject province supplied goods and, when called, warriors. It could not supply a citizen, because the category did not exist.

So the question *why did they not educate their subjects* is malformed. The right question is *into what?* — and it has no answer, because the answer was never invented.

This yields a diagnostic worth carrying to other cases. **The presence or absence of formation for subjects is a direct readout of whether an order has invented a membership category, and an order that has not invented one has a hard ceiling on how cheap it can ever become.** The framework's central gradient runs from an order held by force to an order that runs on the governed's own conviction, and the mechanism of the journey is always the same: the conquered elite is formed in the conqueror's terms, acquires a stake in his order, and eventually cannot tell its own interest from his. That mechanism requires a category to move people into. Tenochtitlan had none, and therefore could not have travelled that road however long it ruled. It was not a slow order or a young one that ran out of time. **It was an order structurally incapable of ever becoming cheap** — which is why, ninety years in, it was still paying for every province with the credible threat of an army's return, exactly as it had in the first year.

The field held by the old orders

One consequence follows immediately and it is the one the colonial modules of this collection would predict. Where the conqueror withholds formation, the order already in place simply holds the field — and here nothing whatever contested it.

Each *altepetl* under the Triple Alliance kept its temple, its patron, its priesthood, its schools, its version of the ritual calendar, its painted annals and its account of where it

had come from. These were not survivals hanging on against pressure. They were the ordinary furniture of local life, unchallenged, because the empire had no instrument aimed at them and no interest in acquiring one.

And the one instrument the Mexica did apply — the seizure of a defeated town's god into the barred room at the centre of Tenochtitlan — reinforced the local order rather than eroding it. To take a god hostage is to concede that the god is real, that he belongs to that people, and that his removal is a loss. A friar who burns an idol says the idol is nothing. A Mexica priest who locks it in the *coacalco* says it is a captive, which is to say a person, which is to say precisely what its worshippers had always said. The Mexica spent ninety years confirming, in the most public possible manner, that every subject people's gods were exactly what those people believed them to be.

Reading formation against the framework

Three findings, and the first is this module's contribution.

Formation for subjects is a readout of whether a membership category exists; where none has been invented, none will be supplied, and the order is permanently barred from the cheap pole. The framework's existing account — that formation is withheld because it would generate claims — describes an order that possesses a status and is rationing it. The Mexica case is the prior condition: an order that never minted the status at all, and therefore had nothing to ration, nothing to withhold, and nothing to promise. A study meeting a conquest with no schools for subjects should therefore ask first whether the conqueror has a category to admit them to, before concluding that he is refusing to.

The second is the mirror of it, and it is the reason this order lasted as long as it did. The formation the Mexica ran *for their own* was, by any comparative measure, extraordinary: universal in intent, institutional rather than familial, addressed to both sexes, beginning at the umbilical cord and continuing to marriage, and delivering a doctrine of debt and payment through every channel a pre-modern state possessed — the midwife, the ration, the thorn, the ward school, the house of song, the festival, and the vocabulary itself. The framework holds that formation is how an order converts force into conviction, and this apparatus converted magnificently. It produced a population that would fight for Tenochtitlan against overwhelming odds and go on fighting. That is a prediction this study will collect in Module 10, and it can be stated now: **when the end came, expect the formed core to fight to destruction and the unformed periphery to change sides within weeks** — because the two were not two parts of one polity that behaved differently under stress. They had been given entirely different things, and one of them had been given nothing.

The third compounds the previous three modules into a single shape. The Mexica did not garrison, so they broadcast terror instead of watching. They did not export a god, so they imported their subjects' gods as hostages. They did not form their subjects, because they had no status to form them into. Each of those is the same decision, made in a different department, by men in positions doing the obvious thing with the materials to hand — and the decision is that **the conquered's inner life was not required.** Not their belief, not their loyalty, not their identity, not their consent. Only their goods, on schedule, delivered by their own lord.

One discipline in closing. It would be easy to read this module as a compliment, because compulsory universal schooling sounds like a modern virtue and the pre-modern world offers almost no parallel. It should be read as a mechanism, not a merit. The face this order gave its children was a face fitted to a purpose, and the purpose was stated at the cutting of the cord: to feed the sun with other people's blood, and to keep feeding it. That an order formed its own people thoroughly and humanely is a fact about its efficiency, not about its goodness; the Mexica household that rationed tortillas by age and pierced a boy's neck with a thorn when he would not learn was raising a child it loved for a life it had already chosen. Both halves of that are true, and holding them together is the whole of the discipline.

A note on sources. The *huehuetlatolli* are from Book Six of Sahagún's Florentine Codex, which is given over almost entirely to this material; the short phrase quoted from the midwife's address to a newborn boy is from the Anderson and Dibble English translation and is identified as such, the surrounding speeches being paraphrased rather than quoted because the available English versions are modern translations. The burial of a boy's umbilical cord on a battlefield and a girl's by the hearth is described in the same book and is corroborated in the other sixteenth-century material. As with every module in this study, Book Six is a Franciscan compilation of indigenous testimony gathered a generation after the conquest, and its rhetorical set pieces are normative literature — the speeches people were supposed to make — rather than transcripts.

The year-by-year account of childhood, the graduated food rations, the tasks and the punishments are from the third section of the Codex Mendoza, folios 57r–61r, prepared around 1541 by Nahua artists and scribes under Spanish supervision for the Emperor Charles V, and now Bodleian MS. Arch. Selden. A. 1. It is described here rather than quoted. Its status as an account of a destroyed order produced for the destroyer's monarch is stated in the text and should be weighed against everything it says.

The Nahuatl terms *tlacahuapahualiztli*, *neixtlamachiliztli* and the difrasismo *in ixtli, in yollotl* are given as the standard lexicography and the philosophical literature

render them; the reading of the *tlamatini* passage in the Códice Matritense follows Miguel León-Portilla's translation and is paraphrased rather than quoted. The claim that Mexica education was compulsory and universal is very widely repeated and is qualified here: what the sources establish is a universally stated expectation and an institutional capacity in the capital consistent with it, not a demonstrated fact about every settlement, and this study states the weaker claim.

The count of some twenty *telpochcalli* in Tenochtitlan and the numbers of youths in each are reconstructions from the sixteenth-century material rather than a census, as noted in Module 1. Population figures for the empire at its greatest extent vary widely between authorities and are given here as a range. The account of the two schools' curricula and discipline follows Sahagún's informants with the modern treatments by Ross Hassig and the standard literature on the sacred precinct; the observation that the choice of school lay with the parents, marked by a ceremony, is from Book Six, chapter 39. The spread of Nahuatl as a vehicular language, and its subsequent adoption by the Spanish administration, follows James Lockhart and the historiography of colonial Nahuatl documentation.

FOUR HUNDRED COBS OF MAIZE

Module 5 · The Cost Column — why the ordinary person complied, worked out separately for the three populations who faced three different ledgers: the Mexica commoner, for whom the arrangement was identity, benefit and inescapability at once; the valley farmer, who could see the army from his roof; and the provincial villager twenty days' march away, for whom the empire was very largely invisible, because the man who came for the tribute was the man who had always come

The question this module exists to answer is not how much the Triple Alliance took. It is why anybody handed it over.

Compliance is never explained by force alone, because force is expensive and scarce and cannot be everywhere; and it is never explained by belief alone, because belief in this empire had been offered to only one city. What decides an ordinary person's behaviour is a ledger with four columns — what compliance costs, what it returns, what non-compliance costs, and whether there is anywhere else to go — plus a fifth that does not appear on any accounting, which is what the neighbours will do. The framework's prediction is that where the return is thin and the belief absent, the cost of refusal must be made very thick, and the sums have to be paid by somebody.

The mistake to avoid is treating this as one calculation. There was no such thing as the Aztec common man. There were at least three, and they faced ledgers so different that a policy which held one of them absolutely left another barely aware that an empire existed.

The Mexica commoner

Take first the man the previous four modules have described: a *macehualli* of Tenochtitlan, in a ward, with a plot allocated by the ward, a son in the ward's school, and a place in the levy.

His **belief** column is full to the top. He had been told at the cutting of his cord what he was for; his ward's school had trained him; the festivals filled the year; the word for his own class carried the doctrine of the gods' penance inside it. Module 4 established that the Mexica formation apparatus was as thorough as any in the pre-modern world, and it was aimed at him. Whatever else is uncertain, it is not seriously in doubt that he believed the arrangement was right.

His **benefit** column is fuller than a reader arriving from the colonial cases would expect. He had courts — sitting permanently, at ward level and above, with professional judges of high standing, handling commoners' civil and criminal cases as a matter of course. He had a law that in at least one respect leaned his way: theft from a subsistence farmer's field was punished more severely than theft from temple or palace land, on the reasoning that the poor man could less afford the loss, and maize was required to be planted along the roadsides so that travellers had something to take other than a farmer's crop. He had the Chapultepec aqueduct after mid-century, and the great dike across the lake after the flood of 1449, and the causeways. He had the enormous market a short walk away, which Cortés reckoned twice the size of Salamanca's and holding sixty thousand people on a market day. And he had the ladder — real, narrow, and open to him alone among the empire's millions.

His **cost of refusal** column is severe and needs no reconstruction. The Mexica penal code carried death for a startling range of ordinary conduct: adultery, and also for those who knew of it and did not report; public drunkenness for the young, with complete licence granted after seventy; theft in the marketplace, where the penalties were harshest because the opportunity was greatest; wearing what one had not earned. There were no prisons — a man awaiting sentence was kept in a slatted wooden cage — so the sanctions available were restitution, enslavement and killing.

His **exit** column is empty. Where would he go? Every neighbouring city was a tributary of his own state or an enemy of it, and in either case he arrived as a Mexica, which was the one identity that guaranteed hostility. His land was his ward's, and it lapsed if he left it uncultivated. Leaving meant losing everything the previous columns contained.

That is a man with high belief, real benefit, brutal sanctions and no way out. He is the cheapest subject any order can have, and the modules to come will need to remember that Tenochtitlan had two hundred thousand of him.

The neighbours in the valley

Move ten kilometres and the ledger changes.

A farmer of Xochimilco or Chalco or Texcoco shared the language, the gods in outline, the calendar and the *altepetl* form; but he was not Mexica, his town had its own patron and its own dynasty and its own memory of having been beaten, and no Mexica school had ever formed him. His **belief** column contains a great deal — in the order of the world, in the debt owed to the sun, in his own lord's right to rule — and almost nothing about Tenochtitlan.

His **benefit** column overlaps the Mexica commoner's at the edges. He used the same market system. He was reached by the same rough peace, in that the constant small wars between valley towns had largely stopped, which for a farmer is not nothing. The dike that protected Tenochtitlan from the salt water also protected the freshwater districts that fed it.

His **cost of refusal** is short, close and demonstrated. The army was a day's march, or a few hours by canoe. Chalco fought the Mexica for decades and was finally broken around 1465, and the reprisal is legible in the demographic record: on Barry Isaac's reading of the sources something in the order of sixteen thousand Chalca left for Huexotzinco rather than live under the settlement. Xochimilco had been blockaded and taken in 1430 for refusing to supply stone and timber, and its people then built the causeway.

And his **exit** column, unlike the Mexica commoner's, is not empty. It is expensive, and it points in one direction: over the mountains, to the unconquered states of the Tlaxcala–Puebla valley, which absorbed the people who left. This is worth stating plainly because it settles a question the framework asks of every case. **Flight is the readout of when an assessment has crossed the line.** For most of the valley most of the time it did not, and people stayed. Where it did — Chalco after 1465 — thousands walked, and the states that received them stiffened accordingly, which is one reason the Triple Alliance could never finish them.

The province, twenty days away

Now the population that mattered most numerically and is hardest to see: a villager in Cuetlaxtlan on the Gulf, or Coixtlahuaca in the Mixteca, or Tochtepec, or the Soconusco cacao country nearly a thousand kilometres south.

His **belief** column, as regards Tenochtitlan, is empty, and Module 3 and Module 4 established why: nothing had ever been offered to him. No temple, no school, no doctrine, no language requirement, no status. He believed what his grandfathers had believed, in the town where they had believed it, under the same dynasty.

His **benefit** column is where the archaeology overturns what the documents would suggest, and this is the single most important corrective in the module. Michael Smith's excavations of commoner households in Morelos — the village of Capilco, the town of Cuexcomate, the city of Yautepec — recovered small adobe houses averaging fourteen to twenty-six square metres and containing, routinely, imported painted pottery from the valley, salt, obsidian blades that had travelled hundreds of kilometres, bronze needles and jewellery from western Mexico, and bark beaters for making paper. Smith's summary is that provincial commoners were relatively prosperous and enterprising

people with access to a wide range of imported goods obtained in markets — and that both the documents and the archaeology indicate the market system operated largely outside state control.

Two things follow from that and they pull in opposite directions, which is why the finding matters. The first is that the picture of a provincial peasantry ground into subsistence by imperial extraction is wrong, and this study should not draw it. Bronze from the Tarascan state crossed a hostile militarised border and ended up in the houses of commoners in an Aztec province, because merchants carried it and markets sold it. The second is Smith's other observation, which is that these households show an economic decline *after* conquest and incorporation. The prosperity was not the empire's gift. It was the region's own commerce, which the empire taxed and slightly damaged.

So the benefit column for the provincial commoner reads: a market that would have existed anyway, made marginally worse.

His **cost of refusal** is the interesting one, because in the ordinary case he never faced it. He was not billed. **The Triple Alliance never assessed an individual.** It assessed a province, in aggregate, at fixed intervals — the Codex Mendoza's tribute lists are drawn exactly this way, so many loads of cloth, so many baskets of cacao, so many warrior costumes from a named province and its named towns. The province's ruler then assessed his towns. Each town assessed its wards. Each ward, the *calpolli*, was collectively responsible for delivering its share, and it allotted the burden among households and rotated the labour duties among its members, with non-participation risking a man's access to land. At every step down that chain the person applying pressure was somebody local — his own lord, his own ward head, his own neighbours.

His **exit** column is therefore largely irrelevant, because he had little reason to use it. He did not need to escape the Mexica. He needed, as he always had, to satisfy the man who had always collected from him.

That is the mechanism of the whole empire stated in one line: **for most of the people under it, the Triple Alliance was not an experience. It was an increase.**

What the neighbours did

The fifth column, the one that does not appear on any ledger, was doing more work than the army.

Collective assessment converts the state's enforcement problem into a neighbour's enforcement problem, and it does so automatically. If the ward owes a fixed quantity and one household short-delivers, the shortfall is made up by the other households, which means that the man who fails is not stealing from a distant emperor but from

the people he lives among. No official has to be posted anywhere for that to be enforced. It is enforced at the well.

Around it ran a dense apparatus of lateral pressure that the Mexica had not invented and did not have to maintain. The law made concealment a capital matter — those who knew of an adultery and did not report it were liable with the offenders — which converts every acquaintance into an informer with a personal interest. The sumptuary rules wrote a man's record onto his body, so that a cloak, a lip-plug, a haircut and the right to wear sandals in the city announced exactly what he had and had not done, and wearing what one had not earned was death; a man's failures were as visible as his achievements, every day, to everyone. And the ridicule ran downward from childhood: the youth who had gone out three or four times and taken no captive kept the long lock at the back of his head and was called by a name meaning a boy who still wears a baby's hair.

This is the Greek soldier's mother telling him to come back with his shield or on it. It costs the state nothing, it operates continuously, it reaches into houses no official ever entered, and it is the reason an empire with no standing army and no garrisons could nonetheless run a society of extraordinary internal discipline. What the Mexica supplied was the schedule and the schedule's visibility. The pressure was supplied by the people the schedule fell on.

One qualification, because the framework's guard rail applies here and the temptation to make this sound sinister should be resisted. A *calpolli* was not primarily an enforcement mechanism. It was where a man's land, his relatives, his temple, his patron, his school and his burial were. Collective liability is what a community with shared obligations looks like from the tax collector's side; from the inside it is what having neighbours consists of. The Mexica did not build it. They found it, and they billed it.

The year One Rabbit

Every ledger has a stress test, and this one has a date.

Between 1450 and 1454 central Mexico failed. The chronicles record locusts in 1446, a flood in 1449, then frost and drought running four years and destroying crop after crop. The disaster is independently confirmed: tree-ring reconstructions for Mexico match nine of the thirteen drought years recorded in the codices, including the extended drought behind the famine of One Rabbit in 1454. This is one of the few points in the study where an indigenous record and an independent physical archive can be laid over one another, and they agree.

What the state did first is what a functioning state does: it opened the granaries and it imported. The stores emptied. Then it stopped being able to do anything, and the ledger settled directly onto the ordinary household.

Sahagún's informants describe what followed in Book Seven, and the phrasing has an economy that no paraphrase improves. Those who had grain bought people. The starving crowded into the houses of merchants and went into bondage — the orphan, the poor, the needy, the beggar. In the published translation, at that time a man sold himself: *"One ate oneself; one swallowed oneself"* — or else he sold and delivered into bondage his own beloved child. Durán records large numbers of children sold to Totonac merchants from the east in exchange for maize; the transaction was a formal change of legal status requiring four official witnesses, and the going rates reported in the literature are on the order of four hundred maize cobs for a young woman and five hundred for a man of working age. Others simply left for the humid lowlands where the rain still fell.

Read that as the cost column resolving. When the benefit column emptied, the ordinary person's remaining assets were his body and his children's bodies, and he sold them — to merchants, at a price, with witnesses, under law, in an orderly market. Nothing broke. The arrangement functioned perfectly while people were being priced in maize. That is what it looks like when an order's institutions are sound and its bargain is thin.

And it is what the elite did next that closes the loop with Module 3. The priests concluded that the debt had been underpaid, and the response to four years of frost was a decision to increase the payment — which required more captives, which required more war, and which is the setting in which the flower war arrangement with the Tlaxcala–Puebla states is placed by the tradition. The famine did not soften the demand on the common man. It raised it, and it raised it in the currency of Module 3, where the payers were the *macehualtin* and the nobles were exchanged.

Reading the cost column against the framework

The framework holds that where belief is thin and benefit thin, the cost of refusal must be thick. The Triple Alliance appears at first to contradict this, because across most of its territory belief was absent, benefit was slight, and yet there was no thick apparatus of coercion anywhere in sight — no garrisons, no police, no resident administration, a floor that went home after every campaign. The resolution is this module's contribution.

An order that assesses collectively never has to reach the individual, and therefore never has to make him a bargain at all. The cost of refusal did not have to

be applied to a Mixtec farmer because the demand never arrived as a demand on him. It arrived as an increase in what his own ward already owed to his own town, which owed his own lord, who owed the province, which owed Tenochtitlan. Every link in that chain was pre-existing and locally staffed. The empire's contribution was a number at the top. This is the cheapest extraction mechanism available to any state, and it explains at a stroke the absences that Modules 1, 3 and 4 each found separately: no garrison is needed to collect from a man you never bill; no doctrine is needed to persuade a man you never address; no formation is needed for a man you never propose to admit.

And it has a price, which is the whole of this study's ending. **Collective assessment buys revenue without building any relation whatever between the order and the governed.** For the man in Coixtlahuaca, Tenochtitlan was a quantity, mediated entirely by people he already knew. That order can be replaced without his life changing in any particular — a different quantity, the same collector — which is exactly what happened after 1521, when local dynasties across Mesoamerica carried on collecting under new masters, some of them into the seventeenth century, and one modern historian's summary of the Yanhuitlán rulers is that two conquests failed to break their continuity. The empire was invisible enough to be replaced without being noticed.

Set that beside Module 4's finding and they are the same wall approached from two sides. There was no membership category, so no subject could ever be admitted; there was no individual assessment, so no subject ever had to be persuaded. Neither absence was a failure of imagination. Each was the correct, economical solution to the problem in front of the men who chose it — and together they meant that after ninety years the Triple Alliance had accumulated enormous revenue and no constituency at all outside the cities that founded it.

Two further findings carry forward. The first is that flight is the diagnostic: the ordinary person's exit is not a constant background hum but a threshold behaviour, and where thousands walk — Chalco to Huexotzinco after 1465, the valley to the lowlands in 1454 — the assessment has crossed a line the sources will not otherwise tell you about. Module 10 should look for the last such threshold. The second is that the lateral column did the heavy lifting throughout, and cost nothing: an order which makes a man's standing visible on his body and his default his neighbours' burden has recruited the entire population as its enforcement arm without paying a single one of them.

One discipline in closing, because this module has weighed lives against maize. To find that provincial commoners owned obsidian blades and bronze needles, that courts sat permanently, that the law protected a poor man's field more strictly than a temple's, and that maize was planted along the roads so travellers need not steal, is not to soften

anything. It is to get the sum right. An order can be genuinely lawful, genuinely provisioning and genuinely orderly, and still be an arrangement in which a four-year drought ends with a father selling his daughter for four hundred cobs of maize while the priests conclude that the gods want more. Both halves belong in the column. A reader who keeps only the first has been flattered, and a reader who keeps only the second has been spared the harder thought — which is that the second half arrived through institutions working exactly as designed.

A note on sources. The short phrase quoted from Sahagún's account of the famine of One Rabbit is from Book Seven of the Florentine Codex in the Anderson and Dibble translation and is identified as such; the surrounding description of people entering bondage is paraphrased from the same passage. Durán's account of children sold to Totonac merchants for maize is paraphrased. The reported prices — in the order of four hundred maize cobs for a young woman and five hundred for a man of working age — are as given in the secondary literature (Warwick Bray) and should be treated as an order of magnitude rather than a schedule. The requirement that a change of status to slavery be witnessed by four officials, and the wooden collars worn by slaves offered in the market, are from the sixteenth-century material.

The independent confirmation of the drought comes from the tree-ring reconstructions published by Therrell, Stahle and Acuña Soto, which match nine of the thirteen drought years recorded in the Aztec codices, including the extended drought preceding One Rabbit in 1454. This is a rare case in this study where an indigenous record can be checked against a physical archive, and it is noted for that reason.

The archaeology of provincial commoner households is Michael E. Smith's, from the excavations at Capilco, Cuexcomate and Yautepec in Morelos, with the artefact inventories and house-size analyses published in *Ancient Mesoamerica* and summarised for a general readership in *Scientific American*; the finding of an economic decline following incorporation into the empire, alongside continued market access, is his and is reported here because it cuts against the reading this study would otherwise reach. His argument that what is conventionally called Aztec tribute is better understood as a tax system is credited where used. The structure of collective assessment — province to town to *calpolli* to household, with rotation of labour duties — follows Frederic Hicks, Pedro Carrasco and Smith; the tribute lists themselves are the Codex Mendoza's second section and the *Matrícula de Tributos*.

The legal material — the courts sitting permanently at ward and higher level, the harsher penalty for theft from a subsistence farmer than from temple or palace land, the requirement to plant maize along roadsides, the capital liability of those who

concealed an adultery, the licence granted to those over seventy, the absence of prisons — is drawn from Frances Berdan's treatment of Aztec crime and punishment and the standard literature, and rests ultimately on sixteenth-century sources describing a system that had already been destroyed. The figure of sixteen thousand Chalca departing for Huexotzinco after the conquest of about 1465 is Barry Isaac's reading of the chronicles. Cortés's estimate of sixty thousand people at the Tlatelolco market is his own and is a conquistador's impression of a crowd.

THE LIGHT SPINDLE AND THE HEAVY

Module 6 · Extraction — what the empire actually took, in what form, and where it went: a tax collected overwhelmingly in cloth, which was money; a schedule whose composition was dictated by the weight a man could carry on his back; and a fiscal base resting on the labour of women, spinning on light whorls a fibre their own households were forbidden to wear

This is the one module of the study where the order's own books can be opened. Two documents record what the Triple Alliance demanded: the *Matrícula de Tributos*, painted on fig-bark paper and possibly the only pre-conquest Aztec manuscript to survive, and the second section of the Codex Mendoza, prepared around 1541, which covers substantially the same ground. Each page is a province: the place-glyph of the head town, the glyphs of its subordinate settlements ranged down the left margin and along the bottom, and above them the goods, drawn item by item with quantities in the vigesimal notation — a dot for a unit, a bar for twenty, a feather for four hundred, a bag for eight thousand.

Thirty-eight or thirty-nine provinces, depending on how the sections are counted. Payments running semi-annually for most textiles and annually for foodstuffs, warrior costumes and feathers. The categories are consistent: cloth in enormous quantity; warrior costumes and shields; foodstuffs — maize, beans, chia, amaranth, chilli; and, from the right regions, cacao, gold dust, jade, turquoise, rubber, amber, jaguar skins, quetzal plumes.

The Tochtepec page in the Gulf lowlands is the richest in the roll. Among much else, that one province delivered every six months sixteen hundred richly decorated cloaks, eight hundred striped cloaks and four hundred sets of women's skirts and blouses.

Two cautions before the numbers are used. The Mendoza was made for the Emperor Charles V and served the Spanish as a yardstick for what could be extracted, which gives its compilers an interest in the figures. And a tribute roll is a demand schedule, not a receipt: it records what was assessed, not what arrived, and Module 1 established that provinces defaulted, revolted and were re-conquered throughout the empire's life.

The porter's back, written into the tax code

The first thing the schedule shows is that the logistics constraint of Module 1 was not merely a military limit. It was a fiscal rule, and somebody had worked it out.

Provinces near the valley paid in bulk: maize, beans, chia, amaranth — heavy, low-value, and cheap to move a short distance. Provinces far away paid in goods of high value and low bulk: cacao, gold dust, jade, feathers, jaguar skins, amber. The gradient is consistent across the roll and it is exactly what a state with no wheeled transport and no draught animals would arrive at if it thought about the problem for an afternoon. A load of maize carried twenty days is eaten by the men carrying it. A load of quetzal plumes carried twenty days arrives.

The far provinces frequently could not produce what they owed from their own territory at all and had to obtain it by trade — the tribute demand acting, in effect, as a requirement to participate in long-distance commerce and remit the proceeds. Soconusco, nearly a thousand kilometres south on the Pacific littoral, paid in cacao, quetzal feathers, jaguar skins and amber. Nothing about that assessment reflects what a Soconusco farmer grew for himself. It reflects what could be carried to Tenochtitlan and be worth carrying.

So the empire's map, its army's reach and its tax code are three expressions of one physical fact. The framework asks at this module what the extraction's form reveals about the extractor; here the form reveals a state that had correctly priced its own transport and built a revenue system around the answer.

Cloth was money

The second thing the schedule shows is more consequential, and it changes what the word tribute means here.

The overwhelmingly largest category in the tribute lists is textiles, and the standard tribute cloth — the *quachtli*, a large plain cotton cloak — was not principally clothing. It was currency. The sources give its value in cacao beans, the small change of the Mesoamerican economy: sixty-five beans for the ordinary grade, eighty and a hundred for finer ones. Berdan's estimate is that a person could live for a year on twenty *quachtli*. The Tlapa tribute roll preserves exchange rates in the same unit — one *quachtli* for twenty cakes of rubber, and a hundred and twelve and a half *quachtli* for one warrior costume. There is little evidence that this cloth was much worn.

That is not a payment in kind. It is a payment in money, of a kind the framework has not previously met in this collection: a commodity currency that is also a

manufactured good, produced in households, standardised by dimension, and accepted everywhere from the Gulf to the Pacific.

The consequence is large. A state that collects grain has collected provisions, and provisions have to be stored, guarded, moved before they spoil, and eventually eaten by somebody; the collection constrains the spending. A state that collects money has collected purchasing power, and can convert it into whatever it likes at the nearest market. The Triple Alliance taxed the labour of five or six million people and received the proceeds in a form it could spend on anything — which is worth holding in mind when the question arises of what it spent them on.

The two spindles

Now the centre of the module, and it is a division of labour visible in the physical equipment of an ordinary house.

Weaving in Mesoamerica was almost entirely women's work, and the training began at the beginning. The Codex Mendoza shows a girl given spinning tools at her naming ceremony, instructed in spinning from about three, spinning unassisted by six, and weaving on the backstrap loom by fourteen — the loom tied at one end to a post or a tree and at the other to a strap around her waist, so that the tension of the cloth is held by her own body leaning back. Susan Strawn's study of the spinning imagery in the Mendoza notes the practical point that follows: a commoner household needed spindles of two weights, because the fibres are different. Light whorls for cotton. Heavier whorls for the coarse fibres of maguey, palm and yucca.

And the two fibres went to two different destinations. Cotton was what the tribute rolls demanded. Maguey was what the household wore.

That division was not an accident of economics; it was law. Motecuhzoma I's sumptuary code, recorded by Durán and enforced more rigorously still under Motecuhzoma II, reserved cotton, fine dyes and feathers to the nobility, and confined commoners to garments of maguey and other coarse fibres, plain, undecorated and cut short. The sources report the penalties for breach as severe — for insignia unmistakably death, and for cloth the reports vary between fines, corporal punishment and death. Two qualifications keep this honest: the enforcement was tightest in the imperial core where display mattered most and looser toward the periphery; and in cotton-growing provinces such as Morelos, commoner women demonstrably grew, spun and wove cotton, since Michael Smith's excavations of their houses recovered the spindle whorls. The rule was not that a commoner never touched cotton. The rule was that a commoner produced it and did not wear it.

So the fiscal base of the empire looked like this. The largest single category of imperial revenue was a currency. The currency was cloth. The cloth was woven by women, in households, on looms strapped to their own bodies, from a fibre their own class was forbidden to put on. And what the woman wove for her own family, she wove on a different spindle.

Two spindles in every house. One for the empire, one for your children.

Where it went

The framework insists on following the goods to their destination, because the destination is what the extraction was for. Here the trail is unusually short.

Some of it went to the palace and the temples, and some to the maintenance of the ruler's enormous household — Cortés's men described the establishment at Tenochtitlan with a mixture of astonishment and arithmetic. Some went to the nobility as the material basis of rank. And a very significant portion went, directly and by name, into the apparatus of war.

The tribute lists themselves demand warrior costumes and shields from province after province — the elaborate feathered suits, back-devices and insignia that Module 1 showed to be the entire currency of promotion in the Mexica army, awarded by the ruler for captives taken and burned with a man at his death so that his sons had to earn their own. The Tlapa exchange rate says what one of those suits was worth: a hundred and twelve and a half cloaks, which on Berdan's subsistence estimate is more than five years of one person's living, in a single garment, delivered as tax.

Follow that circuit round and it closes on itself. The conquered provinces delivered cloth-money and warrior costumes. The costumes furnished the honours that staffed the promotion ladder. The ladder motivated the men who filled the army. The army was what made the provinces deliver. **The extraction and the floor of force were not two systems connected by a treasury. They were one circuit, and the conquered paid, in a currency woven by their own women, for the equipment of the army whose promised return was the only reason they paid at all.**

The levy that does not appear in the pictures

One enormous category is missing from the tribute rolls entirely, and any accounting that stops at the pictures will understate the extraction badly.

Labour — *tequitl*, and the rotational public-works service the sources call *coatequitl* — was owed on top of goods, allocated by the *calpolli* and rotated among its households, with non-participation risking a man's land. It built the causeways that

joined the island to the mainland; the great dike across the lake after the flood of 1449; the aqueduct from Chapultepec; and every enlargement of the Great Temple, seven of them. Module 1 recorded that the war on Xochimilco in 1430 began with a demand for stone and timber and ended with Xochimilco supplying not only the materials but the men to build the causeway. That is the labour levy in its purest form: the war was fought to obtain a workforce.

And beyond labour came bodies. Provincial contingents marched in the imperial armies, fed by their own towns, and their casualties are nowhere in any ledger. Slaves appear as tribute items in some assessments. In the specific case of Module 3's payments to the sun, the captives came principally from war rather than from the tribute rolls, which is a distinction that mattered a great deal to the theology and not at all to the man taken.

What the empire did not take

The framework's discipline requires the negative column, and here it is long enough to change the verdict.

The Triple Alliance did not, as a rule, expropriate provincial land. Local landholding — the *calpolli* allocations, the local nobles' estates — continued essentially undisturbed outside the valley, and the grants of conquered land to Mexica lords documented in Module 2 were concentrated in the basin and its near approaches rather than distributed across the empire. It did not conscript provincial populations into a Mexica identity, because Module 4 established there was no such identity to be conscripted into. It did not suppress local religion, since Module 3 established that it imported gods instead. It did not establish a state monopoly on trade: Smith's finding, from both documents and archaeology, is that the Aztec market system operated largely outside state control, which is why Tarascan bronze from an enemy state turns up in the houses of Aztec provincial commoners.

The extraction was therefore narrow, scheduled, specific and predictable. It arrived twice a year, it wanted particular things in particular quantities, and once it had them it left everything else alone. That is why it was survivable — Smith's provincial households, though measurably poorer after incorporation, were not destitute; they had obsidian, imported pottery, bronze needles and paper. And it is why nobody rose against it merely because it was heavy. Rebellion in this empire, where it occurred, was almost always the act of a local ruler judging that the army would not come, rather than of a peasantry judging that the burden had become unbearable.

Sorted by caste, sorted by sex

Set this module beside Module 3 and the pattern is the same instrument applied twice.

The doctrine held that the sun required the noblest blood, and Chimalpahin recorded that when nobles were captured on either side they were released and the *macehualtin* were the only ones who died. The tax code held that the empire required cotton, and the sumptuary code held that cotton was for nobles. In both cases the obligation was universal in its statement and sorted in its collection, and in both cases it sorted downward onto the class the settlement of 1428 had already called men of little worth.

The tax sorted along a second axis as well, and this is the axis the framework has not previously had to name. Because the levy fell on a manufactured good rather than on a crop, its incidence fell not on the household in general but on whoever did the manufacturing — and the manufacturing was women's work, exclusively, from the age of three. The men of a tributary province paid in maize, in porterage and in military service. The women paid in cloth, which was the largest category, which was money, and which they were forbidden to wear.

Reading extraction against the framework

Three findings, and the first two are this module's contribution.

Where an order taxes in a currency rather than in kind, it has collected purchasing power rather than provisions, and the collection no longer constrains the spending. A state that takes grain must feed somebody with it. A state that takes money may spend it on anything, and what an order spends its money on is therefore a much sharper revealed preference than what it takes. The Triple Alliance took cloth-money and converted a large part of it directly into the insignia and equipment of its own coercive apparatus — which means the framework should treat the extraction and the floor of force in this case not as cause and effect but as a single closed circuit, in which the conquered financed the army that made them pay. A study meeting a commodity-currency tax should follow the money one step further than usual, because the answer will be more informative than the assessment.

Where the levy falls on a manufactured good, its incidence falls on whoever manufactures — and in most pre-modern societies that is women, which makes the largest tax in the system invisible in every account written by men. The framework's prediction of extraction sorted by caste holds here and should be extended: sorted by caste *and by sex*. The image to carry is the two spindles, because it is

not a metaphor but a household inventory. In an ordinary commoner house there were spindle whorls of two weights, and the light ones spun the fibre that went to the state.

The third compounds Module 5 and points at the ending. The extraction was narrow. It took specific goods on a fixed schedule and touched nothing else — not land, not law, not religion, not language, not the market. That narrowness is what made it survivable, and it is precisely what made it worthless as a bond. An order that takes only goods has given the taxpayer nothing to lose but the goods; the man who stops paying loses nothing else, because nothing else was ever entangled. Set it beside the two earlier findings and the shape is complete: no membership category, so nobody could be admitted; no individual assessment, so nobody had to be persuaded; no entanglement beyond the schedule, so nobody had anything at stake. Ninety years of extremely efficient revenue collection had produced an empire that could be walked away from without loss by everyone in it except the people who lived on the island.

One discipline in closing. It is tempting, having found that women wove the currency and could not wear it, to reach for the language of a system designed to exploit them. The evidence does not support design and does not need it. What happened is what this study has found happening in every module: men in positions solving the problem in front of them with the materials at hand. A ruler needing revenue from a province twenty days away takes what can be carried. A cloth that is standard, durable and universally accepted is the obvious thing to demand. Cloth is woven by women because it has always been woven by women. A nobility that needs its rank to be visible reserves the finest fibre to itself, as nobilities do everywhere. Each step is small, local, reasonable to the man taking it. The result — that the fiscal foundation of an empire of millions rested on girls learning to spin at three, and that what they spun for the state was a thing their own mothers were forbidden to put on — was chosen by nobody, and was nonetheless the arrangement, and the fact that no one intended it makes it neither better nor less real.

A note on sources. The tribute assessments are from the second section of the Codex Mendoza (Bodleian MS. Arch. Selden. A. 1) and from the *Matrícula de Tributos*, whose date is disputed — Barlow argued for a colonial-era production, Borah and Cook for both documents deriving from a lost pre-conquest original, and Berdan for the *Matrícula* being genuinely pre-conquest on the grounds that it shows no Spanish influence beyond the glosses. If Berdan is right it is the only surviving pre-conquest Aztec manuscript, which is why its figures are given weight here. The Codex Mendoza was compiled for Charles V and served the Spanish administration as a guide to what could be extracted, which is a reason for caution about its quantities. Both are demand

schedules and not records of receipt; the difference matters, because provinces defaulted.

Quantities are reported as the documents give them. The Tochtepec assessment of sixteen hundred decorated cloaks, eight hundred striped cloaks and four hundred sets of women's garments every six months is from that province's page. The *quachtli* values of sixty-five, eighty and a hundred cacao beans by grade, the estimate that twenty *quachtli* would support a person for a year, and the observation that this cloth shows little evidence of having been worn are Frances Berdan's. The exchange rates of one *quachtli* for twenty cakes of rubber and a hundred and twelve and a half *quachtli* for a warrior costume are from the Tlapa tribute roll as reported by David Carballo. Aggregate empire-wide annual totals circulate in the literature and vary by an order of magnitude depending on which document is counted and how; none is reproduced here.

Modern scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The provincial gradient — bulk staples near, high-value low-bulk goods far — is a standard finding of the tribute literature and follows from Ross Hassig's transport analysis. The account of textile production as women's work, the training sequence in the Codex Mendoza, and the practical distinction between light spindle whorls for cotton and heavier whorls for maguey and other coarse fibres follows Susan Strawn's study of the Mendoza's spinning imagery and the wider literature on Mesoamerican textiles. The sumptuary provisions attributed to Motecuhzoma I are as Durán records them, with the observation that they were enforced more systematically under Motecuhzoma II drawn from the recent legal-historical literature; the reported penalties vary between sources and are given here as a range rather than as a single rule, and the qualification about looser enforcement outside the imperial core is stated in the text. The evidence that commoner women in cotton-growing Morelos spun and wove cotton, and that the market system operated largely outside state control, is Michael E. Smith's from the Capilco, Cuexcomate and Yautepec excavations. The distinction between rotational labour service and the public-works corvée follows Frederic Hicks as adopted by Smith.

WE SEEM TO BE TRADERS

Module 7 · Information and Suppression — an empire that had posted nobody in its own provinces and therefore could not see them, which solved the problem by making its merchants its eyes; whose intelligence in consequence had the shape of a trade report, exact about goods and rulers and blind to disaffection; which burned not its subjects' records but its own; and whose archive was edited twice, at the founding and at the fall, the second time by the conquered and the conquerors together

In every colonial case in this collection the seam is a line drawn by distance. Paris passes a law about the equality of subjects; a colonel in the Aurès writes home about killing all the men; and the essential work of the order is keeping the two ends from meeting, because a metropolitan public that saw what its army did would stop paying for it. The gap is geographical, the concealment is directional, and the audience being protected from the truth is at home.

None of that applies here. There was no metropole. The Mexica ruled from a city inside the country they ruled, twenty days' march at most from the furthest province and a few hours by canoe from the nearest; there was no domestic public whose belief funded the conquest and could be scandalised by it; and the sacrifices which a European empire would have concealed were, as Module 1 established, deliberately *shown* to foreign rulers who were then sent home to describe them. An order that broadcasts its worst conduct as policy is not running a seam of the familiar kind.

So the framework's question has to be re-put. If the concealment did not run between a capital and a distant public, where did the information problem lie? The answer turns out to be the sharpest thing in this study, and it is the exact inverse of the colonial pattern. **The Mexica difficulty was not that the centre knew what happened at the edge and hid it. It was that the centre did not know.**

Blind by construction

Assemble the four absences the previous modules have established and the consequence is unavoidable.

There were no garrisons, so no soldier was stationed in a province to notice anything. There were no individual assessments, so nobody had to be counted, registered or visited. There were no schools, no clergy and no missionaries, so no

institution of the capital's stood in a subject town keeping its ear open. And the tribute itself was collected by the local ruler and handed over in bulk at a scheduled interval, which means that the only regular official contact between the empire and a province was a *calpixqui* arriving to receive goods from a lord who had every reason to tell him that everything was in order.

An empire built this way is cheap and it is blind, and the blindness is not a defect of administration but the same decision that produced the cheapness. You cannot observe a place where you have posted nobody. The Triple Alliance had made itself invisible to its subjects, as Module 5 found; the price was that its subjects were correspondingly invisible to it.

The merchants who were the eyes

The solution was not to build an administration. It was to use the people who were already going.

The *pochteca* were long-distance merchants — a hereditary, endogamous body with their own wards in Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, their own patron god Yacatecuhtli, their own internal ranks, their own courts, and the right to send their sons to school alongside the children of minor nobles. Book Nine of the Florentine Codex is given over to them. They carried obsidian, cloth, dyes, rabbit-fur and slaves out, and brought back quetzal feathers, jade, jaguar skins, amber, cacao and gold — the goods the tribute rolls of Module 6 also demanded, obtained by the other route. They travelled with human porters, by definition, and they travelled far beyond the empire's frontiers.

They were also its intelligence service, and the sources are explicit rather than suggestive. Among the ranks the Codex lists are the *naualoztomeca*, the disguised merchants, who learned the languages and the dress and the customs of the countries they entered so as to pass unremarked, and reported what they found. Others are described in the seating order at the merchants' feasts as the spying merchants who went into warlike places. The head merchant's speech before the ruler survives in Sahagún's collection, and its self-description leaves nothing to be inferred: they had risked their heads and laboured day and night, and although they were called traders and seemed to be traders, *"we are captains and soldiers who, in a disguised fashion, go out to conquer."*

What they reported was what a merchant sees: which routes were passable, what a province produced and at what price, which lord held which town, who was quarrelling with whom, where the fortifications stood. Rulers made decisions on it — the choice of where to campaign next was taken, in the tradition, substantially on the merchants' information.

And the arrangement had a second edge that is a small masterpiece of position logic. The killing of merchants was a standing pretext for war in central Mexico, and the Triple Alliance used it repeatedly. Consider what that does to the calculation of sending a trading party into an unconquered region. If it returns, the ruler has intelligence. If it does not, he has a justification. There is no outcome in which he has wasted the expedition — and the men bearing the risk are commoners financing themselves, not soldiers on his payroll. Around 1490 a merchant party was besieged for years in the far south at Ayotlan; they held out, and Ahuitzotl, when the relief force met them on the road already carrying the goods of the peoples they had fought, awarded them insignia and titles. The merchants had conducted a war of conquest at their own expense and been decorated for it.

That is an empire acquiring both an intelligence apparatus and a forward war-making capacity without establishing either, by attaching them to an activity that was happening anyway. It is the same instinct that billed the *calpolli* instead of the household and fed the army from the towns along the road.

The shape of a trade report

Here is the finding that matters, and it follows from who was doing the looking.

Commercial intelligence has a characteristic profile. A merchant is superb on prices, routes, distances, what is produced where, who rules, which lords are feuding, where the walls are. He is close to useless on whether an ordinary man in a village twenty days from the capital would take up arms against Tenochtitlan if a credible alternative appeared — because that is not information anybody volunteers to a foreign trader, and because it is not information a market produces.

So the Triple Alliance had excellent knowledge of exactly the things a garrison does not need to tell you, and no knowledge at all of the one thing a garrison exists to find out. It knew what Soconusco grew and who governed it. It did not know, and had no method capable of discovering, whether Soconusco would defect. And by the arithmetic this study has been assembling since Module 2, the answer in almost every province was yes — the subject ruler was the one man in the whole chain whose ledger improved if Tenochtitlan fell, and there were sixty or more of him, each still holding his warriors.

The empire's own structure had therefore produced an intelligence service perfectly designed to miss the thing that would destroy it. Not through incompetence: the *pochteca* were extraordinarily good at their work. Through the shape of the instrument. An order that outsources its eyes to commerce will see the world as commerce sees it.

What was suppressed, and what was not

The framework asks next what the order destroyed and what it forbade, and the answer here is as revealing by its omissions as by its content.

The Triple Alliance made no attempt to suppress its subjects' communications. No province was forbidden to keep its own painted books, its own annals, its own dynastic record or its own account of having been conquered. No language was proscribed. No local priesthood was silenced. The empire ran no censorship of any kind over the millions it ruled, for the reason Modules 3 and 4 established at length: it did not need their belief, so it had no interest in what they thought or wrote.

What it did destroy was its own past. Itzcoatl's council, in the 1430s, burned the histories — the passage from Book Ten of the Florentine Codex quoted in this study's Landscape, in which the Mexica lords say it is not necessary for all the common people to know the black ink and the red, that rule will be defamed, that the record holds much that is false. Module 3 refined the reading: the couplet paired with the ink names not the institution of government but the people who are carried. The record was to be kept from the governed.

Set the two facts side by side and the shape is unmistakable. **This order censored the Mexica and left everyone else alone.** It is the exact counterpart of Module 4's schools — total formation for its own, none for its subjects — and of Module 1's broadcast, and of Module 6's spindles. Every instrument in the apparatus was aimed at the same small population, and the empire's millions were, in the fullest sense, outside the conversation.

Three capitals, three archives

And because nothing was suppressed outside Tenochtitlan, the Mexica never came close to controlling the record — even inside their own alliance.

Texcoco kept its own history and its descendant Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl wrote it up, and it makes Texcoco an equal partner, gives Nezahualcóyotl the moral and legal glory, and reports a division of tribute in which the Acolhua took as much as the Mexica. The Mexica-derived tradition behind Durán and Alvarado Tezozómoc makes Tenochtitlan the leader from the first day. Chalco had Chimalpahin, whose flat sentence about which class actually died in the wars gave Module 3 its hardest evidence and whose sympathies are Chalca throughout. Tlaxcala had Diego Muñoz Camargo, who heard the Mexica explanation of the flower wars and refused to believe it. Tlatelolco kept annals that remembered its own conquest by its sister city in 1473.

Every one of these survives because the Triple Alliance had never taken the slightest interest in what its neighbours and subjects wrote down. The entire possibility of reading this empire against the grain — which is what this study has been doing for seven modules — rests on that indifference. **An order that does not form its subjects also does not control their memory**, and its historians will therefore be its enemies, its junior partners and its victims. That is worth stating as a general point: where a study finds a rich, contradictory, multi-centred documentary record for a conquering power, it should suspect that the power never needed a monopoly on it, and ask why.

The war room

Which brings the module to 1519, and to a correction that the recent scholarship has made and this study should carry rather than repeat the old story.

The familiar account is that Moctezuma II was paralysed: that omens had foretold the cataclysm for years, that he took Cortés for Quetzalcóatl returning from the east as prophecy required, and that the empire surrendered to a myth. Almost none of this survives scrutiny. Susan Gillespie's examination of every sixteenth-century text in which Quetzalcóatl appears found that the story in its familiar form did not exist until Sahagún edited Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex in the 1560s. Camilla Townsend's account traces the first printed claim that the Mexica took the Spaniards for gods to Francisco López de Gómara in 1552 — Cortés's chaplain and secretary, who had never crossed the Atlantic. The internal evidence is fatal: Book Twelve itself has Juan de Grijalva taken for Quetzalcóatl when he landed in 1518, which destroys the argument that Cortés arrived in the prophetically correct year; several features of the post-conquest Quetzalcóatl — a peaceable god opposed to human sacrifice — are transparently European; and Cholula, the one major city where Quetzalcóatl was genuinely prominent, was the city that mounted a concerted attack on Cortés.

What Moctezuma actually did, on Townsend's reading of the sources, is what a competent ruler with a functioning information service does. He sent observers to every town of consequence between the coast and the capital and ran what amounts to a war room. When Narváez's fleet arrived in April 1520 — thirteen ships and some eight hundred men — Moctezuma's messenger network brought him the news *before Cortés had it*, and he elected to tell Cortés in order to watch how he reacted. That is a man using intelligence as an instrument against an adversary, from a position of captivity, and getting a genuine advantage from it.

So the empire's information apparatus, in the crisis, performed. And it made no difference whatever, which is the point. Knowing that a hostile force was on the coast was of no use to a state whose only available response to anything was to send an army,

whose army could not be sustained beyond the reach of the tribute network, and whose provinces — the very ones the messengers were passing through — were at that moment being invited by that hostile force to change sides. The Totonacs of the coast, who had sent the first runners to report the ships, were among the first to ally with the men they had reported.

Intelligence is only worth what the instruments available to act on it are worth. An order that has built itself so that its single lever is a marching column will find, at the moment of crisis, that it can see the problem with perfect clarity and cannot touch it.

The second editing

One more thing happened to this order's record, and it is the mirror of the first.

In the 1430s Itzcoatl's council burned the Mexica histories so that the past would match the power. In the 1560s, Nahua aides working with a Franciscan compiled Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex, and out of that collaboration came the omens, the returning god and the paralysed emperor — a version in which the empire fell to prophecy rather than to a coalition of its own subject peoples led by a few hundred foreigners.

Both parties gained. The Spanish acquired a providential conquest, in which the indigenous had recognised their own supersession and effectively consented to it — which is a far more comfortable story than a war won by Tlaxcalan armies and smallpox. And the surviving indigenous nobility, who were negotiating for position under a new order and needed to explain a defeat, acquired an explanation that was neither military failure nor political failure nor the defection of every province they had ruled. Cosmic forces had deceived their ancestors. Nobody had simply been beaten, and nobody had simply changed sides.

This is the same instrument as Itzcoatl's fire, applied at the other end of the empire's life, by the descendants of the men who lit it — and this time in collaboration with the people who had destroyed them. **An order's archive is edited twice: once at the founding, to make the past fit the power, and once at the fall, to make the defeat fit the new power. The second editing is usually collaborative, because a defeat that can be explained cosmologically serves the winners and the losers at the same time.** Where a study finds a conquered elite and its conquerors agreeing suspiciously closely on why the conquest was inevitable, it should treat the agreement as the finding rather than as the evidence.

Reading information against the framework

Two contributions, and they are halves of one thing.

Where an order rules without administering, its intelligence will be commercial, and commercial intelligence has a signature: exact on goods, routes, prices and rulers; blind to disaffection. The framework's colonial seam runs between a knowing centre and an ignorant metropolitan public. This order's seam runs between a centre that knew everything a merchant can learn and nothing a garrison exists to discover, and a periphery whose disposition was the single fact that would decide its survival. The absence of resident administration is therefore not merely an economy in the cost column. **It is an epistemic commitment**, and a study that finds a hegemonic empire with no posted officials should expect its records to be rich in tribute schedules, conquest lists and route knowledge, and empty of anything resembling a report on the loyalty of a province — and should read that emptiness as the empire's own blind spot rather than as a gap in the sources.

And intelligence is worth only what the available instruments are worth. The Mexica saw 1519 coming with reasonable clarity and could do nothing with what they saw, because ninety years of correct, economical decisions had left them with exactly one tool. Every module of this study has recorded the same trade: the cheapest solution taken at each step, each of them right at the time. No garrison, so no eyes. No membership, so no province with a stake. No individual assessment, so no relation to persuade. No entanglement beyond the schedule, so nothing for a subject to lose by defecting. And now: no instrument but the army, so no use for the warning.

One discipline in closing. It would be easy to read the *pochteca* as sinister — a merchant guild doubling as a secret service, generating pretexts for wars by getting itself killed. They were something more ordinary and more interesting than that. They were commoners who had found the one route to wealth and standing that did not require taking captives, and who paid for it by living permanently between two identities: rich but obliged to hide it, honoured but seated below the nobility, decorated by Ahuitzotl with lip-plugs of gold and amber that they wore only on feast days lest the hereditary lords take offence. The speech quoted at the head of this module is a man explaining to a king that his profession is really a form of soldiering — which is what you say when you need the state to value what you do and the only currency of value the state recognises is war. The empire got its eyes for nothing. The men who were the eyes were buying a place in an order that had not made room for them.

A note on sources. The single quoted phrase is from the speech of the principal merchant before the ruler, recorded in Book Nine of Sahagún's Florentine Codex, which is given over entirely to the *pochteca*; it is quoted in the published English

rendering and identified as such, with the remainder of the speech paraphrased. The ranks of the merchants — the *naualoztomeca* or disguised traders, the spying merchants who entered warlike places, the merchant-generals, the elders who administered the marketplace — are as Book Nine lists them, with the seating order at the merchants' feasts as the Codex gives it. The siege of the merchant party in the far south around 1490 and Ahuitzotl's award of insignia are from the same book; the years given for the siege vary between accounts.

The passage on the burning of the Mexica histories is from Book Ten and is quoted in full, with the Nahuatl, in this study's Landscape module; the refinement of the second couplet is set out in Module 3.

The correction to the standard account of 1519 follows the revisionist scholarship of the last quarter-century and is credited rather than reproduced. Susan Gillespie's demonstration that the familiar Quetzalcóatl-return story does not appear in any sixteenth-century text before Sahagún's editing of Book Twelve in the 1560s is in *The Aztec Kings*; Camilla Townsend's tracing of the white-gods narrative to López de Gómara's 1552 account, her reconstruction of Moctezuma's dispatch of observers and his handling of the Narváez intelligence in April 1520, and her argument about why the story served both the Spanish and the surviving indigenous elite, are in *Burying the White Gods* (*American Historical Review*, 2003) and *Fifth Sun*; Matthew Restall's parallel treatment is in *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, and Ross Hassig, James Lockhart and Felipe Fernández-Armesto have argued to the same effect. The internal evidence adduced against the prophecy story — Grijalva taken for Quetzalcóatl in 1518, the European features of the post-conquest Quetzalcóatl, and Cholula's attack on Cortés — is Townsend's.

Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex is the principal indigenous account of the conquest and is used here with the caution the scholarship requires: organised by Sahagún with Spanish glosses in his hand, the Nahuatl the work of his Nahua aides, compiled some forty years after the events by men negotiating a position under Spanish rule. This module's argument treats that provenance as the evidence rather than as an obstacle to it. The surviving parallel traditions — Alva Ixtlilxóchitl for Texcoco, Chimalpahin for Chalco, Muñoz Camargo for Tlaxcala, the Tlatelolco annals — are named in the text and are used throughout this study precisely because they disagree with one another.

THE RADIUS OF A MARRIAGE

Module 8 · Elite Coordination and the Default — why men who did not much like one another nonetheless kept the arrangement running; an order that built one of the finest internal coordination machines in this collection and had no instrument for extending it beyond the reach of a marriage; and a fracture that came, in the end, not from a rebellious province but from the apex using the machine too well

The default is not loyalty and it is not agreement. It is the condition in which every person with standing and the means to act finds that his own position is best served by the arrangement continuing — so that the arrangement is defended, continuously and without anyone intending to defend it, by people who may despise each other and who are each simply looking after themselves. Where that condition holds, an order needs remarkably little force. Where it fails, the failure appears not as popular revolt but as a group with standing and means discovering that it no longer gains.

This module ignores the common man, who was priced in Module 5. Its subject is the hierarchy above him: the great lords of Tenochtitlan, the electoral council, the second office, the two partner capitals, the noble houses of the Basin, the stewards, and the sixty or more dynastic rulers of the provinces. The question is whether each of them, looking at his own ledger, found the arrangement worth keeping — and the answer is different at every ring, which is the finding.

The machine at the centre

Start with Tenochtitlan, because what the Mexica built there is, in engineering terms, among the best solutions to elite coordination in this collection.

The ruler was **elected**, not simply inherited. A council chose him from the royal house after each death, and its core was the **Council of Four** — four great lords, holding the offices of *tlacochcalcatl*, *tlacateccatl* and two others, who were the ruler's advisers and the electors of his successor, each possessed of a veto, so that they were obliged to act in concert. All of them were accomplished generals.

Two features of that arrangement are doing enormous work, and neither is obvious until they are stated together.

The first is that **the highest military office was the antechamber to the throne.** The *tlacochcalcatl* commanded the army in the field when the ruler did not; and the succession record shows the office functioning as a training post and a queue. Itzcoatl held it under his predecessors before ruling; Tizoc was Axayacatl's *tlacochcalcatl* and succeeded him; Ahuitzotl was Tizoc's and succeeded him; Moctezuma II was Ahuitzotl's and succeeded him. Consider what that does to the calculation of the single most dangerous man in the state. The general commanding the army already has the throne in his line of sight *by legitimate means*, on a timetable, with the consent of his peers. A coup would gain him nothing he was not going to receive, and would cost him the consent that makes the office worth having. The men with the capacity to destroy the arrangement were the men with the strongest possible interest in its continuation.

The second is that **succession ran laterally among tested adults.** Moctezuma I was succeeded by his grandson Axayacatl; Axayacatl by his brother Tizoc; Tizoc by his brother Ahuitzotl; Ahuitzotl by his nephew Moctezuma II. Brothers followed brothers. In the whole imperial century there was no child ruler, no regency and no disputed minority — the three commonest causes of elite fracture in hereditary systems anywhere. The pool was adult, militarily proven, and known to the men choosing from it.

Beside that stood a third device, and it is the most elegant of them. The office of **cihuacoatl** — the second position, running the internal administration and the courts of the capital — was created for Tlacaelel, who was a grandson of Huitzilihuitl and therefore of the royal line, a man with a claim who never took the throne. The office then became hereditary in his family: his son Tlilpotoncatzin held it from 1487 to 1503, then Tlacaelel II, then Matlatzincatzin, then Tlacotzin, who was still in post when the empire ended. A rival branch of the royal house was thus given a permanent, powerful, heritable office that existed only so long as the arrangement did — which converted the most plausible source of dynastic challenge into the arrangement's most committed permanent officer.

Elect the ruler from a pool of adult generals; make the top command the queue for the throne; and give the rival royal line a hereditary parallel office. Three moves, none of them theorised anywhere in the sources, each of them the obvious answer to a specific problem a specific man faced. Together they produced a century without a single successful coup in Tenochtitlan.

Tizoc: the machine correcting its own apex

The proof that this was a real default rather than an appearance is what happened to a ruler who damaged it.

Tizoc took the throne about 1481 and led an army to a humiliation at Metztitlán. The chronicles report that he lost the confidence of the nobility so completely that he was helped to die some five years later; his brother Ahuitzotl, who had been his *tlacochcalcatl*, succeeded him and immediately resumed the expansion.

Read that as the framework requires. The Mexica nobility did not rebel against the arrangement. They removed a man who was performing badly *within* it, and replaced him from the queue, and the arrangement continued without interruption. That is exactly what a functioning default looks like from the inside: the office matters more than the occupant, and the men with standing enforce the standard because a ruler who cannot deliver victories cannot deliver their promotions, their estates or their insignia. Module 3 found the same mechanism from the doctrinal side — a coronation was not complete until the new ruler had brought back captives. The apex was held to account by the very people whose positions depended on him.

The partner who was paid too much

Now the alliance, and the two partners diverge instructively.

Tlacopan was a small Tepanec town on the western shore, brought into the alliance in 1428 for reasons that were essentially tactical — its lineage had lost by Maxtla's usurpation, and it sat where a hostile town would have been dangerous. It contributed the least of the three by every measure: least population, least army, least conquest. And it received, by the formula the tradition records, one fifth of all tribute from joint conquests, in perpetuity.

That is a substantial over-payment relative to power, and it bought the most reliable partner in the system. Tlacopan never defected, never had to be coerced, and never gave any trouble at all across ninety years. It is worth stating as a general observation, because it is cheap and it recurs: **over-rewarding a weak partner is the least expensive loyalty an order can buy, because the partner's entire standing is a gift that only the arrangement can continue to give.** A strong partner paid proportionately can always ask whether he needs you. A weak partner paid disproportionately knows exactly what he would lose.

The partner who was paid correctly

Texcoco was the opposite case in every respect. It was a genuine co-equal — the older, more prestigious city, the seat of Nezahualcóyotl, the intellectual and legal centre of the Nahua world, with its own Acolhua domain, its own dynasty of enormous standing, and by the formula an equal two-fifths share.

Being paid correctly, Texcoco's position depended on its own weight rather than on Tenochtitlan's favour — and its share therefore eroded steadily as Tenochtitlan's weight grew. The sources on this are partisan in opposite directions, as Module 7 noted: the Acolhua tradition preserved by Alva Ixtlilxóchitl insists on equality, the Mexica tradition on Tenochtitlan's primacy from the first day. What is not disputed is the direction of travel. By the reign of Moctezuma II the junior capital was junior in fact, and the arrangement that had made Texcoco's fortune in 1428 was making Tenochtitlan's now.

Hold that beside Tlacopan and the pattern is clear: **the reliable partner was the one whose share exceeded his strength, and the unreliable one was the partner whose strength exceeded his share.**

Tlatelolco, 1473

Between the two capitals sat a third case, on the same island. Tlatelolco had been founded by a Mexica faction in the 1330s, held its own dynasty from 1376, and grown rich on the greatest market in Mesoamerica. In 1473 its ruler Moquihuix went to war with Tenochtitlan under Axayacatl, and lost, and died.

What followed is the clearest statement in the record of what happened to an elite that fell out of the arrangement. Tlatelolco's dynastic line ended. It was not given a new *tlatoani*. It was placed under a *cuauhtlatoani* — a military governor, an appointed administrator rather than a legitimate dynastic ruler — and it was governed that way from 1473 until the death of Itzquauhtzin in 1520, nearly half a century.

The Nahua distinction between *tlatoani* and *cuauhtlatoani* is not a technicality. One is the legitimate speaker of an *altepetl* with a dynasty behind him; the other is a man placed there by somebody else, and was widely regarded as illegitimate — a perception the Spanish would later find useful, since an appointee could not become an independent focus of allegiance. To be put under a *cuauhtlatoani* was to be told that your city no longer had a position of its own to defend.

Kinship as the instrument

Now the wider hierarchy, and here the mechanism of coordination becomes visible because it is a single instrument used everywhere.

Within the Basin of Mexico, the imperial powers managed subordinate elites primarily through **kinship**. Daughters of the Mexica royal house were married into local dynasties; troublesome rulers were replaced with close relatives of the imperial line; interim governors, where imposed, were usually favoured kinsmen. Frances

Berdan's summary of the outcome is unambiguous: within the Basin this political strategy caused little trouble, and it was effective, because the imperial powers could not afford unreliable rulers so close to their own seats of power. Chalco, the hardest conquest in the Basin, was placed under an imposed governor from 1464 to 1486 and then restored to dynastic rule — punished, then reintegrated.

This is a real default and it worked for the reason defaults work. A lord of Coyoacan or Xochimilco or Culhuacan who was married to a Mexica princess, whose sons were half Mexica, whose position had been confirmed by Tenochtitlan and whose neighbours' positions had been confirmed the same way, was defending his own house when he defended the arrangement. He need not have liked the Mexica. His interests were simply inside theirs.

But notice what the instrument is. It is marriage, adoption, and the placement of relatives. And an instrument of that kind has a **radius**.

Beyond the radius

Past the Basin and its near approaches, the kinship network thins and then stops, and there was nothing else to put in its place.

Consider a *tlatoani* of a province fifteen days' march away. He has not married a Mexica princess and neither has his father. No Mexica relative sits in his court. There is no imperial office he can hold, no rank he can be given, no status he can acquire, no school his sons can attend — Module 4 established that no membership category existed to admit him to. What he has is a tribute schedule, a *calpixqui* who arrives to receive the goods, and the knowledge that an army may come if he stops.

Run Module 2's default question on that man and the answer is the same as it was there: **he is better off if the arrangement ends.** He keeps his throne, his lands, his people and his warriors, and stops paying. Berdan states the consequence in almost the framework's own terms — as the empire expanded, several outlying subjects, with loose ties to their overlords and less to gain from their imperial attachments, engaged in violent and expensive rebellions.

That is the default failing exactly where the theory says it must: not among the poor, who had no means, but among men with standing, armies and nothing to lose. And the revolts were not occasional. They were a permanent feature of the empire's operating costs, one of the reasons — as Module 1 found — that the Triple Alliance could never concentrate its whole force against Tlaxcala.

So the shape of this order's coordination is now stateable. **The Mexica built an excellent default machine and it had a radius, and the radius was the reach of a marriage.** Inside it, elites were kin and behaved accordingly. Outside it, they were

billed. The empire's revenue extended four or five times further than its coordination did, and no amount of tribute could buy a stakeholder in a province where there was no status to confer.

The apex breaks the machine

And then, in 1515, the fracture — and it came from the top of the coordination machine rather than from any rebellious province.

Nezahualpilli of Texcoco died without designating an heir. He left six legitimate sons, several of them plausible, and by Texcocan custom the nobility elected the ablest. Moctezuma II intervened. Using his influence and his kinship with the candidate — Cacama was his nephew by marriage, son of Nezahualpilli by a Tenochca princess — he secured Cacama's election, over rival brothers, in 1516.

From Moctezuma's position this was the obvious move and probably the correct one. Texcoco was the second capital, its share was still nominally two-fifths, its independent weight had been a standing problem for three generations, and a succession left to the Acolhua nobility might produce a ruler with ideas of his own. He had the influence. He used it. Every previous ruler had used the same instrument — kinship — to manage the same problem, and it had always worked.

It did not work this time. Ixtlilxóchitl II, one of the passed-over brothers, refused. He left for Metztitlán — an unconquered state the Mexica had failed to beat in the 1480s, which is exactly where a man in his position would go — raised support, took Otumba and the northern Acolhua towns, and marched on Texcoco. Moctezuma sent troops; Ixtlilxóchitl occupied the approaches to cut them off. The war ended in a settlement that split the Acolhua domain three ways among the brothers.

The second capital of the Triple Alliance had been partitioned, and one third of it was held by a man with a dynastic claim, an army, and a specific grievance against Tenochtitlan. Three years later Cortés landed. Ixtlilxóchitl II became one of his principal allies, and fought at the siege of Tenochtitlan in 1521. He ruled Texcoco under Spanish authority until his death in 1531, baptised Fernando.

The framework asks where fracture comes from and answers: from inside the hierarchy, among people with standing and means who have stopped gaining. This is that, in its purest available form. And the mechanism deserves to be stated precisely, because it is not carelessness. **The apex broke his own coordination machine by operating it correctly.** The Texcocan electoral council existed to produce a ruler the Acolhua nobility consented to; Moctezuma overrode it to produce a ruler *he* consented to; and in doing so he converted a legitimate succession into an imposition, which is the one thing that turns a disappointed claimant into a rebel. The instrument that had

bound the Basin for ninety years — put your relative on the throne — was the instrument that broke the alliance, because it was applied to a partner strong enough to have an alternative.

Narrowing the coalition

One further act of the same reign belongs here, because it runs in the same direction and the two together describe a policy.

On his accession in 1502 Moctezuma II barred commoners from service in the royal palaces and from high office, reversing the practice of his predecessors, and widened the divide between *pipiltin* and *macehualtin* as deliberate policy. The men displaced were substantially the *cuauhpipiltin* — commoners ennobled by capture, the class Module 2 identified as the arrangement's *most* reliable defenders precisely because they held land they could not sell, status that was remembered as recent, and nowhere else in the world to go.

The reasoning from his position is transparent: a ruler taking over from Ahuitzotl's long and aggressive reign wants his own men in place, and a nobility of birth is easier to read and to bind by marriage than a shifting body of promoted soldiers. It is the same logic as the Texcoco intervention — tighten the circle, make it kin, make it legible.

And it is the same error. In seventeen years he removed the one channel by which a Mexica commoner could acquire a stake, and broke the succession of the one partner strong enough to resent it. **He narrowed the set of people with a position to defend, twice, in the two directions available to him**, and the framework's prediction about narrowing coalitions needs no elaboration beyond the date: 1519.

Reading coordination against the framework

Three findings, and the first is this module's contribution.

Where an order's only instrument of elite coordination is kinship, the default has a radius, and the radius is the reach of a marriage network. This is a scaling law and it is measurable in this case. Inside the Basin, where imperial daughters married local lords and troublesome rulers were replaced by imperial relatives, the default held so well that Berdan can say the strategy caused little trouble. Outside it, where no marriage reached and no office existed to confer, the same empire faced violent and expensive rebellions as a permanent operating condition. Nothing about the tribute rate explains the difference — the outer provinces were often taxed more lightly in real terms than the Basin. What explains it is that a kinship instrument cannot be scaled: a

royal house can produce only so many daughters, and every marriage binds exactly one lineage.

The corollary is the one this study has now reached from four directions. Rome could make a Gaul a senator; France could naturalise; Britain could make a subject. **Tenochtitlan could only make a man a brother-in-law**, and that is a coordination technology with a hard ceiling. Module 4 found the absence of a membership category as a ceiling on formation; Module 5 found it as an absence of relation; Module 6 as an absence of entanglement; and here it appears as a limit on the geographical extent of the default itself. An empire whose revenue reaches a thousand kilometres and whose coordination reaches sixty has a structural problem that no additional conquest can solve, because every conquest extends the first without extending the second.

And a coordination machine can be destroyed by its own operator using it correctly. The framework's usual account of elite fracture is neglect — a group is left out, or squeezed, or forgotten. That is not what happened in 1515. Moctezuma II did precisely what ninety years of Mexica practice recommended, with the instrument that had always worked, for reasons that were sound at the time. The intervention failed because it was applied to a partner who possessed the one thing the Basin's lords did not: an alternative, in the form of six brothers, an unconquered state to raise troops from, and a domain large enough to hold a third of. **The kinship instrument works on subordinates and breaks on peers**, and an order that has forgotten which of its partners is still a peer will discover it at the succession.

The third finding is a compounding observation rather than a new claim. This study has now assembled the whole ledger of the hierarchy, and it reads as a set of concentric rings with a sharp edge. At the centre, a nobility, a priesthood, a stewardship and a body of ennobled commoners who would lose everything — and who fought, in 1521, to the last stone. Around them, a Basin of kin who mostly held. Around that, a partner capital already split. And beyond, sixty-odd armed dynasts each of whom improved his position by the arrangement's end, connected to the centre by nothing but a schedule and the memory of an army.

An order in that condition is not weak. It is extremely strong at the centre and has no periphery at all in the political sense — only a collection region. What it needs, to come apart, is not a rising. It needs somebody to make the ending credible, and to arrive with enough force that the first defector is not destroyed for being first. That is what Module 10 will find happening in 1519, and this module has now explained why it took only two years: **there was nothing to convert. The provinces were not persuaded to defect. They were merely given a reason to believe that defecting would work.**

One discipline in closing. It is easy, knowing the ending, to read the Mexica arrangement as brittle. It was not. Measured against the other cases in this collection it was, at its centre, unusually robust: no coup in a century, no child ruler, no regency, a mechanism for removing a failing apex without breaking the office, a rival royal line converted into a permanent officer, and a junior partner so well paid that defection never occurred to it. The men who built those things were not fools and they were not lucky. They solved, one at a time, every internal coordination problem that has destroyed comparable states — and then found that the problem they had not solved, and had no tool capable of solving, was the one that scaled with their own success.

A note on sources. The offices and their occupants are as the sixteenth-century sources give them and the chronicles disagree on dates. The composition and function of the Council of Four, the veto held by each of its members, and its role as both advisory body and electoral college derive from Durán, Sahagún and the Spanish accounts, and are reconstructions rather than a constitutional document — no such document existed. The succession of *tlacochcalcatl* to the throne (Tizoc after Axayacatl, Ahuitzotl after Tizoc, Moctezuma II after Ahuitzotl) is drawn from the king lists and the military-office lists; the identification of Quappiatl as Moctezuma II's *tlacochcalcatl* in 1519 is from the same material. The *cihuacoatl* succession — Tlacaelel, Tlilpotoncatzin, Tlacaelel II, Matlatzincatzin, Tlacotzin — is as recorded, with the caution stated in Module 3 that Tlacaelel himself reaches us almost entirely through the interdependent *Crónica X* group and that Susan Gillespie's work counsels scepticism about how much of his career is construction. The removal of Tizoc some five years after the Metztitlán reverse is as the chronicles report it and the manner of his death is not established.

The two-fifths / two-fifths / one-fifth division is the formula the tradition preserves, transmitted chiefly through Acolhua sources; its practical application is disputed and the historiography is summarised in this study's Landscape module. The partisan opposition between the Acolhua tradition of Alva Ixtlilxóchitl and the Mexica tradition behind Durán and Alvarado Tezozómoc is treated in Module 7 and applies to everything said here about the relative standing of Texcoco.

The distinction between *tlatoani* and *cuauhtlatoani*, the government of Tlatelolco by military governors from Moquihuix's defeat in 1473 until Itzquauhtzin's death in 1520, and the imposed governorship of Chalco from 1464 to 1486 followed by restoration, are from Frances Berdan, whose account of imperial elite strategy — marriage into local dynasties, replacement of troublesome Basin rulers with imperial relatives, and the contrast with outlying subjects who had loose ties and less to gain and rebelled violently and expensively — is the principal modern source for this module's

central argument and is paraphrased throughout. The broader framework of tributary and strategic provinces is from Berdan, Blanton, Boone, Hodge, Smith and Umberger, *Aztec Imperial Strategies*.

The Texcocan succession crisis is reconstructed principally from Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, who was a direct descendant of the protagonists and whose account of his own ancestor's conduct should be read accordingly; the outline — Nezahualpilli's death in 1515 or 1516 without a designated heir, six legitimate sons, Moctezuma II's intervention to secure Cacama's election, Ixtlilxóchitl II's withdrawal to Metztitlán, his seizure of Otumba and the northern Acolhua towns, and the three-way partition — is common to the accounts, though details of the fighting are given differently. Ixtlilxóchitl II's alliance with Cortés, his participation in the siege of 1521, his baptism and his rule of Texcoco until 1531 are established. Moctezuma II's exclusion of commoners from palace service and high office is Ross Hassig's reading of the sources (*Aztec Warfare*, 1988) and is discussed in Module 2.

THE INTERIORS OF HUMBLE HOUSES

Module 9 · Plurality or Foreclosure — whether anything in this order protected a person from the apparatus; where the protections that did exist came from, which was never the peasant and always a faction with means; why the one group below the nobility that won real legal autonomy had to hide every sign of it from the street; and what decides whether such a concession survives its own regime

The question is not whether the Mexica had liberties in the modern sense; obviously not, and the answer would be worthless. The question this module exists to answer is narrower and much more useful. There was a state apparatus with the power to take a man's land, his status, his family and his life. Did anything stand between a person and that apparatus? If so, who put it there, what did they get in exchange for putting it there, and did it survive?

The framework's expectation is that protections are never granted downward out of generosity. They are residue: the settlement of a fight inside the hierarchy, in which a faction with standing and means bargained from a position of strength, and the apex — not wanting to destroy the arrangement over it — conceded something. The concession is then available to whoever can invoke it afterwards. That is what makes a liberty more than words: not the wording, but the fight it records and the parties who retain an interest in enforcing it.

This order gives an unusually clean test of that proposition, because it contains one case where the mechanism worked completely, one where it worked and then was reversed, and one where the residue outlived the state that made it.

An apparatus with law in it

First, the honest positive account, because it is substantial and a reader arriving from the sacrifice literature will not expect it.

Courts existed at every level and sat permanently. Below, the ward courts; above them the *teccalli* courts in Tenochtitlan and in every provincial capital, permanently in session, staffed by three or four judges, dealing as their main business with the civil and criminal cases of commoners; above those the *tlacxitlan*, hearing criminal appeals and acting as court of first instance for nobles and warriors; above that the ruler's own court

for the hardest cases. Judges were titled with a phrase meaning lords who govern the public welfare and speak it, held high standing, and were subject to severe penalties for corruption — the Texcocan tradition holds that Nezahualcóyotl executed judges who took bribes and, in the story that is always told about him, his own son.

The substantive law contained real protections and some of them ran downward. Theft from a subsistence farmer's field was punished more severely than theft from temple or palace land, on the stated reasoning that the poor man could less afford the loss. Maize was required to be planted along the roadsides so that a traveller had something to take that was not a farmer's crop. Nobles were punished more harshly than commoners for the same offences, in drunkenness and in several other categories — the signature, as Module 3 noted, of a code that genuinely binds its own elite. Homicide was capital regardless of provocation, on the reasoning that killing usurped an authority the ruler alone held, which is a doctrine that protects the weak by removing private vengeance from everyone.

That is not nothing. It is a functioning legal order with real content, and it has to be held in view while the rest of this module takes it apart.

Eighty laws, and the position of the man who made them

The most celebrated body of law in this world was Texcoco's, and the standard account credits Nezahualcóyotl with promulgating eighty laws, enforced through four councils — war, finance, justice, and a fourth for music and ritual — and covering treason, theft, adultery, homicide, drunkenness, inheritance and military misconduct, with nobles explicitly not exempt. Texcoco's juridical prestige was such that Tenochtitlan and Tlacopan referred their difficult cases there: the alliance followed Tenochtitlan on war and religion and Texcoco on law.

Now read the position of the man who issued it, because the position explains the law and the conventional account does not.

Jerome Offner's reconstruction sets it out. Nezahualcóyotl came back to a throne he had been driven from as a boy, after his father's assassination and years of exile. He faced disloyal relatives, subordinate rulers of uncertain allegiance, several ethnic groups in conflict inside his own domain, and an economic and imperial order changing under him faster than anyone could manage. What he did in response was to promulgate a single code that standardised the legal practice of diverse peoples in different places — and, critically, to standardise legal administration in order to limit corruption **by reducing the discretionary power of his own judges.**

That last clause is the whole thing. A weak ruler does not reduce his judges' discretion out of a love of due process. He does it because a judge with discretion is a

patronage machine, and every one of them is a point at which a rival lord can buy a favourable outcome and thereby acquire a following. Rules that bind judges bind the men who would otherwise own the judges. Predictability is what a ruler wants when his own grip is uncertain and his subordinates are stronger than he is.

So the most impressive body of protective law in fifteenth-century Mesoamerica was produced by exactly the mechanism the framework predicts: not as a gift to anyone, but as a coordination device by a man bargaining from weakness who needed his own hierarchy to be legible. And the beneficiaries were real. A commoner in a Texcocan town, appearing before a judge whose discretion had been narrowed by a known rule, was in a materially better position than one before a judge who could decide as he pleased. The protection was a by-product. It was also genuine.

What the code was not

The limits, stated exactly, because they are the module's negative finding and they are severe.

There was **no right of appeal**. Review by a higher court existed and was used, but it did not amount to an individual right detached from the discretion of officials: a case went up because someone in authority sent it up. At the highest level, judgment was an act of government — the palace asserting that local conflict and official misconduct remained subject to sovereign correction — which is a very different thing from a subject having a claim he can compel a court to hear.

There was **no assembly**. There was no body in which commoners were represented, no petition as of right, no institution corresponding to an estate, a commune, a guild court of general jurisdiction or a parlement. The *calpolli* had a head and a council of elders and real internal autonomy over its own land, but its function in the imperial structure was to be assessed collectively and deliver, as Module 5 established, and it had no standing against the level above it.

There was **no protected speech** of any kind, and the direction of travel is on record: Itzcoatl's council burned the histories precisely so that the people who are carried should not know the black ink and the red. An order whose founding act is the destruction of the record it holds is not one in which anyone has a right to speak about it.

And the law itself was not a charter. Module 2 established that this settlement was lodged in a remembered bargain rather than a statute; the eighty laws are a code of conduct with penalties, not an instrument in which the ruler binds himself and grants

anything to anybody. Nobody in this order held a document that said what the ruler could not do to him.

The merchants' deal

Which brings the module to the one clear case of a group below the nobility extracting real protection — and it is a textbook instance of the mechanism, right down to the timing.

In 1473 Tlatelolco went to war with Tenochtitlan and lost. Its ruler Moquihuix died; its dynasty ended; the city was placed under a *cuauhtlatoani* and governed by appointed administrators for the next forty-seven years, as Module 8 recorded. Tlatelolco also happened to be the commercial capital of Mesoamerica and the home of the *pochteca*, the long-distance merchants, who lived in their own district there and were by some distance the wealthiest commoners in the empire.

At precisely the moment their political standing was destroyed, the merchants had a great deal to sell. They had capital, routes, depots, foreign languages, relations with rulers beyond the frontier, and — as Module 7 established — the only intelligence apparatus the empire possessed, in a state that had posted nobody anywhere and could not see its own provinces. The reading in the literature is that they struck a bargain with the victor: they would serve as the ruler's merchants and his eyes, under his patronage, and in exchange they would keep their own affairs to themselves.

What they held afterwards is remarkable and is not seriously in dispute even where the dating is. The *pochteca* were the only social group in the empire with a legal system separate from the state's. Their elders, the *pochtecatlatoque*, administered justice among their own members in their own courts, covering both marketplace regulation and criminal matters involving merchants; the head of them at Tlatelolco was accounted a magistrate among the imperial judges. They lived in their own districts in Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, Texcoco, Chalco, Otumba and elsewhere, under their own rules. They were privileged to own property, they had their own law codes, they could offer captives in sacrifice — a right otherwise reserved to nobles and warriors — their sons attended the *calmecac* alongside the children of minor nobles, and Ahuitzotl awarded their vanguard members insignia of gold and amber.

That is protection from the apparatus, obtained by commoners, and it is the only instance of it in this study.

Why it held, and why it had to be hidden

Two questions follow, and the answers between them are this module's contribution.

Why did it hold? Not because it was written down, and not because anyone thought merchants deserved it. It held because the state could not perform the function itself. An empire with no resident administration, no posted officials and no way of learning anything about its own periphery had exactly one instrument for seeing beyond the tribute schedule, and that instrument was a hereditary guild that financed itself, trained its own people, spoke the languages, and could not be replaced by decree. A ruler who broke the merchants would have had to build a foreign service from nothing, and no Mexica ruler ever had the administrative apparatus to attempt it. **The autonomy was underwritten by irreplaceability.**

Why did it have to be hidden? Because the concession was corporate, not general, and it purchased no change whatever in the merchants' rank. They remained *macehualtin*. The sumptuary code of Module 6 still applied to them: their wealth rivalled the nobility's and they were obliged to conceal it, sending their caravans out late in the evening, revealing their riches only inside their guildhalls, and living in houses that were outwardly humble and sumptuous within. The insignia Ahuitzotl gave them — the gold and amber lip-plugs, the rabbit-fur capes — were worn only on feast days, so as not to provoke the hereditary lords.

That is the shape of liberty in this order, stated in a single image. A class with its own courts, its own law, its own gods and enough money to buy the nobility, keeping every sign of it behind a plain wall. The protection was real and it was invisible, and it was invisible because visibility would have made it a claim — and a claim would have provoked exactly the fight the merchants had bargained to avoid.

The privilege that did not hold

Set beside it the case that failed, because the contrast identifies the variable.

The *cuauhpipiltin* — commoners ennobled by capture — held, from the founding distribution of 1428, a genuine advancement: land, exemption from tribute, a seat on the war council, and nobility for their sons. It was the one general channel in the system, open in principle to any Mexica commoner who could take four captives. Module 2 recorded its built-in limits; Module 8 recorded its end. In 1502 Moctezuma II barred commoners from service in the royal palaces and from high office, reversing his predecessors' practice, and the channel closed.

Ask why that could be done to the ennobled soldiers and not to the merchants, and the answer is not about strength — the *cuauhpipiltin* included generals. It is that **the function was replaceable.** Anything a promoted commoner did in the palace or in an office could be done by a noble; there were plenty of nobles, the schools produced more, and a ruler who wanted a legible, kin-bound administration could simply staff it from the class he was married into. Nothing had to be built. The cost of withdrawal was nil, so the privilege lasted exactly as long as no ruler wanted it back.

The merchants' function could not be staffed from the nobility, because nobles did not walk to Guatemala in disguise. So it survived.

What outlived the state

One more thing happened to Texcoco's law, and it answers the question of whether any of this accreted.

The eighty laws were recorded — not as an alphabetic statute, but in the Nahua graphic system, in documents that could be read by someone who knew how. Motolinía, the Franciscan, was able to recover a great many Texcocan legal rules in the 1530s and 1540s by consulting indigenous documents made in that system, with a certain amount of explanation and, sometimes, the assistance of a knowledgeable master. And Texcocan legal material subsequently turns up doing work in the colonial courts: Nahua litigants under Spanish rule drew on their own codified law in mounting defences of land, status and tribute obligations before a foreign judiciary.

That is accretion, and it is worth being precise about the form it took. The residue did not accumulate within the Mexica order, which had no mechanism for it — no statute to amend, no precedent to cite, no body with standing to invoke a prior concession. It survived by being **legible to a stranger**, and it was picked up and used under the successor regime, against the successor regime, by the descendants of the people it had governed.

The *pochteca*'s law did the opposite. It was internal, held within the guild, unwritten as far as anything survives, and inseparable from the corporation that administered it. When the empire fell, the merchant guilds' power ended with it, and their law left no residue at all.

So the durability of a concession beyond its own regime is set by whether it exists in a form that someone outside the group can read and invoke. A privilege embedded in a corporation dies with the corporation. A rule written down, however alien the script, can be picked up by anybody — including by the losers, a century later, in a courtroom belonging to somebody else.

Reading liberty against the framework

Three findings, and the first two are this module's contribution.

A concession's durability inside its own order is set by whether the conceding power can replace the function the concession is attached to. Not by how it was won, not by whether it was written, not by the strength of the group at the moment of bargaining. The *pochteca* and the *cuauhpipiltin* both extracted real advantages from rulers who needed them; one held and one was withdrawn, and the difference is that a noble could do an ennobled soldier's job and could not do a merchant's. This is a testable proposition and it travels: where a study finds a durable privilege held by a group below the ruling class, it should look for a function the apex cannot internalise — the credit of financiers, the knowledge of lawyers, the reach of merchants, the literacy of clerks — and where it finds a privilege withdrawn without a fight, it should expect to find that the function had become staffable from within.

And a concession's durability beyond its own order is set by whether it exists in a form a stranger can read. Texcocan law was recorded in a graphic system, and it was still doing work in Spanish colonial courtrooms a century later, in the hands of Nahua litigants defending themselves against a new apparatus. Merchant law was corporate, oral and internal, and vanished with the guild. This refines Module 2's finding rather than contradicting it: an order that lodges its *settlement* in a memory forecloses accretion, because there is nothing for a claimant to point at — but an order that lodges its *rules* in a legible record has, without intending to, armed the people it governed against whoever governs them next.

The third finding is negative and it is the one that matters most for the shape of the study. **Nothing in this order reached the common man as a right.** The protections he had were real — permanent courts, judges punishable for corruption, a rule that leaned toward the poor man's field, maize on the roadside, homicide capital in every case, nobles punished more harshly than he was — and every one of them was something the state had given itself, for its own reasons, and could take back without anybody having standing to object. The *macehualli* had law. He did not have rights, and there was no institution through which he could ever have acquired any, because there was no assembly, no petition as of right, no appeal detached from official discretion and no text in which anything had been promised to him.

Which returns the study to its central absence, arriving now from a fifth direction. Module 4 found no membership category, so nobody could be formed into anything. Module 5 found no individual assessment, so nobody had to be persuaded. Module 6 found no entanglement beyond the schedule, so nobody had anything to lose. Module 8 found coordination limited to the reach of a marriage, so nobody outside the Basin

had a stake. And here: no general standing, so no concession made to one group could ever be claimed by another. **Every liberty in this order was a private treaty with a corporation, and private treaties do not compound.** An arrangement of that kind can be extremely well governed — Texcoco was — and still leave, after ninety years, not one person outside the ruling houses who could stand up and say that something was owed to him.

One discipline in closing, because a module that finds no rights is easily mistaken for a module that finds no justice. Those are different things, and the difference is the point. A Texcocan farmer before a judge bound by known rules, in a system where the man who stole his maize was punished more severely than the man who stole the temple's, was receiving justice — quite possibly better justice than a contemporary English villein. What he was not receiving was a *claim*: anything he could assert against the men above him, or invoke on his own behalf if the rules changed. Justice is what an order gives; rights are what it can be made to concede. This order gave a good deal and conceded almost nothing, and the two facts sit together without contradiction, as they do in a great many well-run states before and since.

A note on sources. The judicial structure — ward courts, the *teccalli* courts sitting permanently in the capital and in provincial capitals, the *tlacxitlan* as appellate court and court of first instance for nobles, the ruler's own court above it — is reconstructed from the sixteenth-century sources and from the modern legal-historical literature; no pre-conquest procedural document survives, and the reconstruction is not uniform across the Nahua world. The observation that higher review existed without amounting to an individual right of appeal detached from official discretion is from that literature and is load-bearing for this module's argument. The substantive rules cited — the heavier penalty for theft from a subsistence farmer, the roadside maize, the harsher punishment of nobles, homicide as capital in all cases on the reasoning that killing usurped the ruler's authority — are from Frances Berdan's treatment and the standard accounts, and rest on sources describing a system already destroyed.

The eighty laws of Nezahualcóyotl and the four councils are reported by Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, his direct descendant, and the original code has never been recovered; his account should be read with the partiality noted throughout this study. The reading of the code as a response to Nezahualcóyotl's political position — disloyal relatives, uncertain subordinate rulers, conflicting ethnic groups, and the deliberate reduction of judicial discretion to limit corruption — is Jerome Offner's, whose *Law and Politics in Aztec Texcoco* is the principal modern study; his observation that Motolinía recovered a great many Texcocan legal rules by consulting indigenous documents in the Nahua graphic communication system is likewise his and is central to

this module's second finding. The counter-tradition that Nezahualcóyotl adapted Mexica precedent rather than inventing law, and requested officials from Tenochtitlan in 1433, is noted in the recent literature and should be held against the heroic version. The Mapa Quinatzin depicts the Texcocan palace with its judges and is the principal pictorial evidence.

The *pochteca*'s legal autonomy — their own courts under the *pochtecatlatoque*, their own law codes, their own districts, the right to own property and to offer captives in sacrifice, their sons in the *calmecac*, and the insignia granted by Ahuitzotl — is attested in Book Nine of the Florentine Codex and in the standard reference literature. The obligation to conceal their wealth, travel by night, and wear their insignia only on feast days is from the same material. The specific reconstruction linking the grant of that autonomy to a bargain struck with Axayacatl following the defeat of Tlatelolco in 1473 is a reading offered in the literature rather than a documented agreement; the sources place the merchants' rise across the Axayacatl and Ahuitzotl reigns generally, and the argument of this module does not depend on the precise date. Moctezuma II's exclusion of commoners from palace service and high office in 1502 is Ross Hassig's reading and is discussed in Modules 2 and 8.

The use of indigenous legal material by Nahua litigants in colonial courts is well attested in the historiography of colonial Nahuatl documentation, following James Lockhart and the scholars of the New Philology; it is cited here for the specific point that the residue outlived the order and was used against its successor.

THE ARMY THAT DID NOT COME

Module 10 · Change and Collapse — an order that in two centuries never faced a rising of its own commoners and was destroyed in two years by its own subject rulers; where the four cracks appear in the record and in what order; and why the decisive act of the whole conquest was the arrest of five tribute collectors on the coast, an event that cost nothing and proved the only thing the empire had

Before anything else, a negative finding, because it disposes of the story most readers arrive with.

In the whole imperial century there is not one recorded uprising of Mexica commoners against the Mexica settlement, and not one recorded rising of a provincial peasantry against imperial tribute. Not one. And this is a population that had been told at its own founding that it was a body of cowards who had sold themselves for ever, that paid a tax in cloth its women could not wear, that watched its sons taken for the stone while the nobles of both sides were exchanged, and that in 1454 sold its children to Totonac merchants for four hundred cobs of maize while the priests concluded the debt had been underpaid.

Every rebellion in this empire's record was led from above. Tlatelolco in 1473 was led by its *tlatoani* Moquihuix. Cuetlaxtlan, Coixtlahuaca, the Huaxtec provinces, Chalco: every one a dynastic ruler and his nobility withholding tribute. The Totonac revolt of 1519 was led by the *cacique* of Cempoala. And the timing is elite timing rather than grievance timing — the rebellions cluster at successions in Tenochtitlan, when a new ruler's capacity was untested, and Emily Umberger's reading of 1473 puts the calculation exactly: rulers were predisposed to challenge a new *tlatoani* in order to restore the standing of their own cities.

The framework holds that structural change comes from the fracture, exhaustion, conquest or overbreeding of the elite, and never from the rising of the ruled, because a functioning floor of force destroys unorganised bodies with something approaching regularity. The Mexica case does not merely illustrate that proposition. It states it in its cleanest available form, because here the ruled had grievances of exceptional severity, numbered several millions, and never once tried — and the men who did try were, without exception, men with thrones and armies.

The four cracks, dated

Set the record against the four ways a floor cracks and all four are present, in a legible order.

Overbreeding comes first, and it is unusually easy to see because Nahua rulers were polygamous and every child of a noble was a noble. A *tlatoani* with many wives produced many sons, each of whom expected to be seated and maintained, and there was one seat. The case that matters is Texcoco: Nezahualpilli died in 1515 or 1516 leaving six legitimate sons — Cacama, Coanacoch, Ixtlilxóchitl II, Tecocoltzin, Yoyontzin, Tetlahuehuetzquititzin — and one throne. That is elite overproduction in its purest textbook form, and it produced, as the mechanism predicts, a surplus of able, formed, ambitious men with nowhere to go.

Fracture follows directly, and Module 8 dated it. Moctezuma II intervened in the Texcocan succession to install his nephew Cacama over the rival brothers. Ixtlilxóchitl II withdrew to Metztitlán — an unconquered state the Mexica had failed to beat — raised support, took Otumba and the northern Acolhua towns, and forced a three-way partition of the second capital of the Triple Alliance. The disappointed heir had become a counter-elite with a domain and an army, four years before any Spaniard landed.

Exhaustion was already in the accounts and Module 1 listed it: the Tarascan catastrophe of about 1478 with twenty to thirty thousand dead; Metztitlán about 1481; the Oaxaca disasters of about 1496; the rout at Atlixco about 1503 with Moctezuma weeping over the returns; the bloodbath of about 1506; and the defeat of about 1517 in which, on Durán's account, the Aztecs were completely vanquished and every commander taken, after which Moctezuma stripped his surviving officers of their insignia. An empire that has been beaten six times in forty years by neighbours it cannot finish is an empire whose central asset — the credible expectation that its army returns and wins — has been publicly depreciating for a generation.

Conquest by a rival elite is the fourth, and it is the one that requires the most correction, because the rival elite was overwhelmingly not Spanish.

Who actually took the city

The arithmetic of the siege of 1521 is not seriously disputed and it is worth stating plainly. On the assaulting side: something between nine hundred and thirteen hundred Spanish infantry, eighty-six horses, sixteen guns, thirteen brigantines — and between fifty thousand and two hundred thousand indigenous warriors. Tlaxcala above all; Ixtlilxóchitl's Texcoco; Huexotzinco; the Otomí; Chalco; Xochimilco; Mixquic;

Iztapalapa; the Totonacs of the coast, of whom on some accounts more than eight thousand had followed Cortés from Cempoala in 1519.

The Spanish were roughly one per cent of the force that destroyed Tenochtitlan. The commanders named on the assaulting side include Xicoténcatl the Younger and Chichimecatecuhtli of Tlaxcala and Ixtlilxóchitl II of Texcoco alongside Cortés and Alvarado. The scholarship that established this — Matthew Restall's work on the myths of the conquest, and the essays gathered by Laura Matthew and Michel Oudijk in *Indian Conquistadors* — puts it as flatly as it can be put: Cortés would never have reached the city without tens of thousands of Mesoamerican warriors, and the polities that supplied them were states already in conflict with the Mexica who allied themselves with the newcomers against their imperial lords.

So the fourth crack is real, and its correct description is this. **The Triple Alliance was destroyed by a coalition of Mesoamerican states, in which a small foreign contingent supplied leadership, some decisive technology, and one thing more valuable than either.**

Five tax collectors

That one thing is the centre of this module, and it happened in the summer of 1519 before a shot had been fired in anger.

Cortés landed on the Gulf coast and was received at Cempoala by the ruler the Spaniards called the Fat Cacique, whose Totonacs had been Mexica subjects since around 1480. The complaint he made is the complaint of Module 6 and Module 3 combined: the tribute collectors had picked the country clean, and Totonac children were being taken to the altars of Tenochtitlan.

Then five Mexica tax collectors arrived in the town, and Cortés had them seized.

Consider what that act was. It was open rebellion by a tributary province, committed publicly, in the presence of the province's own nobility, against the officials of an empire whose entire enforcement mechanism — as Module 1 established at length — was the credible expectation that the army would return. There were no garrisons to react. There was no resident administration. There was only the promise, held in the mind of every subject ruler in Mesoamerica, that this was the kind of thing after which the army came.

And Moctezuma did nothing.

Cortés, playing both sides, then quietly released the collectors and sent word to Tenochtitlan that he hoped the emperor was well. Later in the year Moctezuma did dispatch Qualpopoca to restore the province, and there was fighting near Nauhtla. But the demonstration had already been given and it could not be taken back. The most

important proposition in the empire — that defection was punished — had been tested in public, cheaply, by a coastal town of fourteen thousand people, and had failed to produce the army.

That, and not any battle, is the hinge of the conquest. An order that rules by presence can absorb a local insult, because the garrison is there and the correction is routine. An order that rules by reputation cannot, because reputation is a belief, and beliefs are falsified by single public events. The Mexica had built, with great skill and at very low cost, an empire whose enforcement lived entirely in the expectations of sixty-odd men. The arrest of five officials on the coast changed what those men expected.

The coordination problem, and who solved it

Which allows this module to state the mechanism of the collapse exactly, because it has been assembled piece by piece across the study.

Module 2's audit found that the subject ruler was the one man in the whole hierarchy whose position improved if the arrangement ended. Module 8 found sixty or more of him, each still holding his warriors, his walls and his dynasty, connected to the centre by a schedule and nothing else. So the question is not why they defected in 1519. It is why they had not defected in 1470, or 1490, or 1510.

The answer is that they faced a coordination problem, and the Mexica floor was precisely the instrument that kept it unsolved. Any one ruler who withheld tribute faced the army alone, and would be made an example of — that was the whole purpose of the spectacular violence Module 1 identified as the substitute for a garrison, and the whole purpose of bringing foreign lords to watch the sacrifices and sending them home to describe them. Sixty men who would all gain from simultaneous defection, none of whom can afford to move first, will not move at all. They will pay, and resent it, and rebel individually at successions and be crushed individually, which is exactly the pattern the record shows.

What Cortés supplied was not force. Nine hundred men were not force in a country that fielded armies of eighty thousand. **What he supplied was a solution to the coordination problem**: a body that stood outside the existing structure of fear, that could absorb the cost of being first, that had already been seen to defy the empire without consequence at Cempoala, and around which defection could be simultaneous rather than sequential. The subject rulers did not need to be persuaded of anything — Module 4 established there was nothing to persuade them out of, since nobody had ever tried to make them Mexica. They needed to believe that this time the cost would be shared.

This is the refinement this module offers to the framework's account of conquest as one of the four cracks. **A conquering elite does not have to be stronger than the order it destroys, and frequently is not. It has to be outside the coordination failure that the order's floor exists to maintain.** Where a study finds an empire ruling by reputation over a periphery of armed subordinates, it should expect the collapse to be triggered by an actor small enough to be militarily insignificant and external enough to be unafraid — and it should date the collapse from the first public demonstration, not from the first battle.

The lake, inverted

One technological point belongs here, because it undid the physical foundation the Landscape identified.

The whole shape of this empire was set by the fact that a man could carry twenty-three kilograms and a canoe could carry vastly more. That is why an island in a salt lake became a capital, why the market at Tlatelolco could be provisioned from twenty kilometres away, and why Tenochtitlan could be supplied when no besieging army could feed itself.

Cortés had thirteen brigantines built at Tlaxcala, and in December 1520 they were carried over the mountains in pieces, on the backs of some eight thousand indigenous porters, and assembled on the lake. The invaders solved the transport problem by the identical method the Mexica had always used — human carriage, in bulk, by people who did it for a living — and then used the result to take the water. With the brigantines the causeways could be cut and held, the canoe traffic broken, and the city isolated on its own rock. The aqueduct from Chapultepec was severed. An island whose entire advantage was that it could be supplied by water and its enemies could not was converted, in a season, into an island that could be supplied by nobody.

The core that did not break

And now the confirmation of a prediction this study made in Module 4, which should be recorded because it was made in advance of the evidence and the evidence is unambiguous.

Module 4 concluded that the Mexica had run the most complete formation apparatus in the pre-modern world for their own population and offered literally none of it to anyone else, and predicted that when the end came the formed core would fight to destruction and the unformed periphery would change sides within weeks. Both halves happened.

The periphery went in weeks. The Totonacs in the summer of 1519; Tlaxcala after a fortnight's fighting in September; Texcoco's northern third under Ixtlilxóchitl; then, as the siege closed, Chalco, Xochimilco, Mixquic, Iztapalapa — the towns of the Basin itself, one after another, surrendering and joining.

The core did not break at all. Moctezuma II was removed by his own warriors, who were unhappy at his passivity — the default machine of Module 8 correcting a failing apex exactly as it had corrected Tizoc forty years earlier. Cuitláhuac, son of Axayacatl and commander of the armed forces, was elected and drove the Spaniards out of the city with heavy losses. He died of smallpox after eighty days. Cuauhtémoc, a grandson of Ahuitzotl, about twenty years old, was elected in his place and fought for another year, refusing terms, holding the city street by street through a siege of some seventy-five to ninety-three days, until the last quarter of Tlatelolco fell on 13 August 1521.

Three successions in eighteen months, under plague and siege, each producing a competent adult by consensus of the council, with no usurpation and no civil war inside Tenochtitlan. **The internal coordination machine functioned perfectly to the last day.** It was never the thing that failed.

Smallpox

The epidemic reached the Basin in late September 1520 and ran about seventy days. It killed a very large proportion of the population — the estimates vary too widely to be worth reproducing — and among the dead was the reigning *tlatoani*.

Two observations, and both are structural rather than medical. The first is that a disease which kills at the apex is exhaustion in the framework's sense: it removes the men who hold the arrangement together at the moment they are most needed, and it removes them faster than any war. Cuitláhuac had eighty days in which to do the one thing that might have saved the empire — assemble a Mesoamerican coalition against the newcomers, which he attempted, sending embassies including to Tlaxcala. Tlaxcala refused. Eighty days was not enough time to undo ninety years of policy.

The second is that the epidemic did not distinguish between sides, and the coalition against Tenochtitlan absorbed it and continued. What decided the outcome was not which population lost more people but which political structure could survive losing them — and the Mexica structure, which had no membership category, no formed periphery and no stakeholders outside the Basin, could not.

Reading collapse against the framework

Three findings.

The first is the contribution: a conquering elite does not need to be stronger than the order it destroys; it needs to stand outside the coordination failure that the order's floor exists to maintain. The Triple Alliance's periphery was, by 1519, entirely composed of men who would gain from its end and could not move first. That is not a stable equilibrium held by loyalty or belief; it is a standoff held by an expectation, and expectations are cheap to falsify. Nine hundred Spaniards could not have beaten eighty thousand Mexica warriors and did not; a hundred thousand Mesoamericans could and did. What the nine hundred contributed was to be the first mover that nobody else could afford to be, and to survive being it in public. **Where an order rules a periphery of armed subordinates by reputation, the decisive event of its fall will be a demonstration rather than a defeat, and it will cost almost nothing.** Five arrested tax collectors at Cempoala did more structural damage than the Tarascan disaster of 1478.

The second is that all four cracks appear here, in sequence, and the sequence is causal rather than coincidental. Overbreeding — six sons and one throne at Texcoco — produced the surplus. The apex's attempt to manage the surplus produced the fracture, in 1516. Forty years of exhausting and unwinnable war on the eastern frontier had already made the floor's credibility doubtful and had left an unconquered Tlaxcala as a place for the fractured faction to raise troops. And the conquering elite that arrived in 1519 found a fracture already open, a counter-elite already armed, and a periphery already waiting for someone to go first. **The four cracks are not four alternatives. In a mature order they are usually one sequence**, and a study should date the earliest of them rather than the most visible.

The third is that the common man was, as the framework holds, the weight and never the hand. No commoner rising ever occurred, in two hundred years, under provocations that would have produced one in most agrarian societies. The Mexica commoners fought, magnificently and to destruction, *for* the order that had priced them at nothing. The provincial commoners changed sides when their own lords changed sides, and continued paying the same collectors afterwards. And the resentment of the subject peoples — which was real, and which the Totonac cacique stated in his first conversation with Cortés, and which is the reason the coalition could be assembled at all — was genuinely a cause and never once the agent. It was the weight on the lever. The lever was worked by men with thrones.

One discipline in closing, and it is the hardest in the study. To establish that the Mexica were destroyed by Mesoamericans is not to shift a moral burden onto the Tlaxcalans and the Texcocans and the Totonacs, and it is emphatically not the old exculpatory story in a new costume. Every one of those peoples acted exactly as this

study has shown men in positions acting throughout — reading their ledger, seeing an opening, and taking it. Tlaxcala had been blockaded for decades and had watched its people taken to the stone. The Totonacs had been paying since 1480. Ixtlilxóchitl had been passed over by a foreign king's intervention in his own city's law. Each of them made the choice his position recommended, and none of them could have known what they were letting in — that the ally would not go home, that the disease would not stop, and that within a generation the distinction between the victors and the vanquished would have collapsed into a single category of *indios* paying tribute to Castile. The framework says the common man is fuel; this module has to add that in a conquest of this kind **the victorious elite is fuel too**, and discovers it afterwards. Tlaxcala fought on the winning side of 1521 and spent the next three centuries petitioning Spanish courts for the privileges it had been promised.

A note on sources. Figures for the siege of 1521 vary widely between the accounts and are given here as ranges: Spanish infantry between roughly nine hundred and thirteen hundred with eighty-six horses, sixteen guns and thirteen brigantines, against an indigenous allied contingent variously estimated between fifty thousand and two hundred thousand, and a Mexica defence given at around eighty thousand warriors. These derive from Cortés's own letters, from Bernal Díaz del Castillo, and from the indigenous accounts, all of which had reasons to inflate or deflate; the ratio, however, is not disputed in any of them. The duration of the final siege is given as roughly seventy-five to ninety-three days and the city fell on 13 August 1521.

The correction of the conquest narrative to centre indigenous participation follows Matthew Restall's *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* and the essays edited by Laura Matthew and Michel Oudijk in *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica*, together with the pictorial evidence of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, which records Tlaxcalan actions the Spanish accounts omit — including, on the Tlaxcalan telling, the rescue of a wounded Cortés on 30 June 1521. The Tlaxcalan sources are themselves petitions for reward and should be read as such; that they are self-interested does not make the arithmetic wrong.

The Cempoala episode — the reception by the ruler the Spaniards called the Fat Cacique, his complaint about tribute collectors and about children taken for sacrifice, the seizure of five Mexica tax collectors, and their secret release — is from Bernal Díaz del Castillo and the associated material, with the Nahua account in Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex, and is paraphrased. The subsequent dispatch of Qualpopoca and the fighting near Nauhtla are from the same sources. The naming of the Cempoala ruler varies between accounts (Xicomecoatl, Chicomacatl, Tlacochcalcatl) and no attempt is made here to resolve it.

The Texcocan succession and the career of Ixtlilxóchitl II are treated in Module 8 and rest principally on Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, his descendant, with the partiality noted there. The transport of the brigantines in pieces over the mountains by some eight thousand porters, the severing of the Chapultepec aqueduct and the cutting of the causeways are as the accounts describe them. Cuitláhuac's eighty-day reign, his death from smallpox in December 1520 and his diplomatic approaches to Tlaxcala are attested; Cuauhtémoc's election, age and conduct of the defence likewise, with his age given variously in the sources. Mortality figures for the epidemic of 1520 vary by an order of magnitude between authorities and none is reproduced here.

Modern scholarship is paraphrased and credited. Emily Umberger's reading of the 1473 Tlatelolco war as a challenge by rulers predisposed to test a new *tlatoani* is hers. The observation that provincial rebellions clustered at Mexica successions and were led throughout by dynastic rulers rather than by commoners is drawn from the standard accounts of imperial rebellion, principally Frances Berdan's and Ross Hassig's; the claim made here is that no commoner rising against the imperial settlement appears in the surviving record, which is a statement about the record and not a proof that none occurred.

THE DIKE THAT WAS NEVER REBUILT

Module 11 · The Grim Accounting — what an armed group's ninety years in power cost, in two columns: the sword, which can be estimated within an order of magnitude and not better; and the metabolic note, which the Basin had been running up since the first chinampa was staked out, and which was called not by the violence of 1521 but by the disappearance of the coordination that violence removed

An armed group took power in 1428, held it for ninety-three years, and was destroyed in 1521. The accounting of that period has two columns and they must be kept apart, because the temptation is to add them and the result of adding them is nonsense.

The **sword column** is what the arrangement's violence cost directly: men killed in its wars, captives killed on its temples, populations broken in its reprisals, and the deaths of its ending.

The **metabolic column** is the note. An advanced order lifts a population above the land's natural carrying capacity by coordination — irrigation, drainage, storage, redistribution, the movement of food from where it is grown to where it is eaten. That lift is a loan against the coordination continuing. When conquest, revolution or collapse removes the coordination, the note is called, and it is paid in famine and disease rather than in blood, which is why it is usually left off the ledger and why it is almost always the larger number.

For this case the ratio between the two columns is on the order of a hundred to one, and the larger figure is not the one the sword produced.

The sword, while the arrangement ran

The wars first, because they are the best-attested and still not good.

Module 1 listed the disasters and the chronicles' figures for them: the Tarascan campaign of about 1478, with Triple Alliance dead given as 20,900 by Durán and 31,800 by Alvarado Tezozómoc; the humiliation at Metztitlán about 1481; the wrecked armies in Oaxaca about 1496; the rout at Atlixco about 1503 with what the sources call a great slaughter on both sides; the indecisive bloodbath of about 1506, at 8,200 dead on one count and 10,000 on another; the comprehensive defeat of about

1517. Those are the *failures*, recorded because they were shocking. The successful campaigns — some two hundred to four hundred towns brought under tribute across five reigns — are recorded as conquest glyphs rather than casualty lists, and their cost is simply not known.

Then the sacrifices, where honesty requires a wider range than any reader wants. The tradition gives 80,400 for the rededication of the Great Temple in 1487; the informants behind the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* give about four thousand for the same event; the higher figure fails on arithmetic before it fails on anything else. Estimates in the modern literature for annual sacrifices across the empire run from the low thousands to twenty thousand and cannot presently be narrowed. What is not in doubt, because it has been excavated, is the Huei Tzompantli beside the Templo Mayor: more than six hundred crania recovered to date from one structure, dated to roughly 1486–1502, men, women and children among them.

Then the reprisals, which leave demographic rather than numerical traces. Xaltocan broken and its site substantially abandoned for a generation. Chalco conquered about 1465, with something in the order of sixteen thousand people leaving for Huexotzinco rather than live under the settlement. Whole populations moved as colonists to frontier stations — nine hundred married men and their families to Oaxaca, two thousand to the Tarascan border.

And then the famine of 1450–54, which belongs in the sword column only partly. Four years of frost and drought, independently confirmed by tree rings; the granaries opened and emptied; and then, as Module 5 recorded, an orderly market in human beings, at roughly four hundred maize cobs for a young woman, formalised before four witnesses. That was the metabolic note being called *while the state still functioned*, and it is the single most useful comparison in this module, because we can see what the same climatic stress did with an administration in place and, ninety years later, without one.

The sword, at the ending

The siege of 1521 lasted between roughly seventy-five and ninety-three days. The figures are contested at every point and are given here as the range the sources support: Mexica dead put at a hundred thousand and upward on some counts, with wider estimates for the whole campaign running from a hundred thousand to two hundred and forty thousand including civilians; some twenty thousand of the indigenous allies killed; between four hundred and fifty and eight hundred and sixty Spaniards. The city itself was destroyed street by street and quarter by quarter, its buildings pulled down as the attackers advanced to deny cover, until the last stand at Tlatelolco on 13 August.

Add every figure in this column at its highest plausible value and the sword's total across ninety-three years of empire and two years of conquest is somewhere in the hundreds of thousands. That is an enormous number. It is also, in what follows, a rounding error.

What the Basin was carrying

Now the loan, and it has to be described before it can be called.

The Basin of Mexico held, at contact, somewhere between one and three million people, on the floor of a closed high-altitude bowl with no outlet to the sea, in a society with no draught animals, no wheeled transport and no iron. Tenochtitlan alone held perhaps two hundred thousand on an island in a salt lake with no agricultural land and no fresh water.

None of that was possible without engineering, and every piece of the engineering was coordination.

The **chinampas** turned the freshwater shallows of the south into some of the most productive farmland in the pre-industrial world, cropping several times a year without fallow — and they required continuous maintenance, dredging, willow planting and canal clearance, organised at the level of the ward and above.

The **dike** — the *albarradón* ordered in the late 1440s by Motecuhzoma I and Nezahualcóyotl after the flood of 1449, and extended under Ahuitzotl — ran for kilometres across the lake to hold the saline water of Texcoco away from the fresh water of the south, protecting both the city and the chinampa districts that fed it. It existed because it was built, and it stood because it was maintained.

The **aqueduct** from Chapultepec brought drinking water to an island that had none.

The **causeways** and the canal network carried by water what no porter could carry by land, which was the whole basis of the Basin's density.

And above these sat the **redistribution**: the market system, the tribute schedules bringing food from thirty-eight provinces, and the granaries the state opened in 1454.

Take those five things together and they are a single machine that had raised the carrying capacity of a closed basin several-fold. The population sitting on top of that lift was the loan. Nothing about it was fragile while the machine ran. Everything about it was contingent on the machine running.

The note called

The machine stopped in 1521, and the payments came due in three instalments that between them constitute one of the largest demographic catastrophes in the human record.

Smallpox, 1519–20: the epidemiological literature puts the deaths at five to eight million across Mexico. It killed the reigning *tlatoani* in eighty days, as Module 10 recorded.

Cocoliztli, 1545–48: an estimated five to fifteen million dead, up to eighty per cent of the surviving native population. In absolute and relative terms this approaches the Black Death, which killed roughly twenty-five million in western Europe across four years.

Cocoliztli again, 1576–78: a further two to two and a half million, roughly half of those who remained.

And here the physical evidence does something remarkable, because it identifies the mechanism rather than merely recording the outcome. The tree-ring reconstructions assembled by Rodolfo Acuña-Soto with David Stahle, Malcolm Cleaveland and Matthew Therrell — the same body of work that confirmed the drought behind the famine of 1454 — show that both cocoliztli epidemics fell inside the sixteenth-century megadrought, the most severe and sustained drought to strike north-central Mexico in six hundred years. Their reading is that cocoliztli was an indigenous haemorrhagic fever carried by rodent hosts and amplified by extreme drought conditions, exploding in the wet intervals when rodent populations surged, and spreading fastest in the rainy season.

Read that carefully, because it is the finding. **The drought was not caused by the conquest.** Droughts of this order had struck the Basin before — one had produced the famine of 1450–54 — and would again. What had changed was everything that stood between a drought and a population living above the land's natural capacity: the granaries, the redistribution network, the chinampa maintenance, the tribute flows, the local authority structures that organised the response, and the health of a population already halved by smallpox and pressed into labour drafts. In 1454 the same stress produced a terrible famine, an orderly market in children, and a society that recovered. In 1545 it produced eighty per cent mortality.

The note was not called by the sword. It was called by the disappearance of the administration the sword removed.

The dike that was never rebuilt

And the most exact single image of that disappearance is the dike.

During the siege of 1521 the dams and dikes of the lake system were destroyed. They were never rebuilt.

What followed is three centuries of a city drowning in a basin its predecessors had engineered to stay dry. Major flooding in 1555 and 1556 forced the construction of a second dike. The watershed above the lakes was stripped for timber and grazing, the lakes silted, and the flooding worsened; floods came again in 1604 and 1607. In 1607 the colonial government began the *Desagüe* — the attempt to drain a closed basin by cutting a channel through the ridge at Nochistongo into the Tula river — with some forty thousand conscripted indigenous labourers digging over twenty kilometres of channel and a tunnel six and a half kilometres long and fifty-odd metres deep, under conditions that killed a great many of them. Charles Gibson called it one of the largest engineering enterprises of pre-industrial society anywhere in the world. It failed. In 1629 the city flooded again and parts of it stood under water for five years, and the relocation of the capital was seriously debated.

The comparison is not that the Spanish were poor engineers. It is that the Mexica arrangement had solved the Basin's water problem with a dike, a set of causeways and continuous ward-organised maintenance, at a cost the framework's cost column can accommodate; and its successor, having destroyed that solution and lost the labour and the local organisation that ran it, spent three hundred years and enormous quantities of forced labour failing to replace it, and finally solved it by draining the lakes altogether — which is why Mexico City today sinks into a dry lakebed and cannot get enough water.

The same story ran in the countryside in a different register. Elinor Melville's study of the Valle del Mezquital, north of the Basin, found a region that at contact was densely settled by Otomí farmers with good soils, irrigation, springs and a healthy watershed. As disease emptied the villages, cropland fell out of cultivation and became available for grazing; Spanish sheep, arriving in an environment with no competing native grazers, underwent a classic ungulate irruption — exponential increase, an apogee in the late 1560s, then a crash — and left behind desiccation, salination, sheet erosion and hardpan. Within about five decades a productive agricultural valley had become the arid, marginal country it was assumed always to have been. Melville's demographic figures for the region show an indigenous decline on the order of ninety per cent between 1521 and 1600.

That is the metabolic column in its purest form: **the carrying capacity itself was destroyed, not merely the coordination that had exceeded it**, so that even a recovering population would find less land than its grandfathers had farmed.

The forgetting that did not happen

The framework's other question at this module is whether enough time passed for people to forget that violence had made the arrangement — for the order to become simply the way the world is.

For the Mexica the answer is no, unambiguously, and the whole of this study explains why.

Ninety-three years was not long, but length was not the obstacle. The Landscape showed what naturalisation looks like when it succeeds: Tula, three centuries dead, so thoroughly absorbed that *toltecatl* had become the ordinary Nahuatl word for a skilled craftsman, and descent from a vanished state was the only recognised warrant for legitimate rule anywhere in the valley. That is a conquest that became furniture.

The Mexica never came close, and had no instrument that could have taken them there. They ran no schools for their subjects and had no status to admit them to; they exported no doctrine and imported their subjects' gods instead, as captives; they assessed collectively so that no subject ever had to be persuaded of anything; they entangled nobody beyond a tribute schedule; and their elite coordination reached exactly as far as a marriage network. In 1519 every subject ruler in Mesoamerica knew perfectly well that an armed group from an island had taken his grandfather's city by force and would come back if he stopped paying. **Nothing had been done, in ninety-three years, to make that fact fade, because nothing in the apparatus was designed to.** Which is why the periphery changed sides in weeks.

The forgetting that did

The successor order achieved in about two generations what the Mexica could not achieve in three, and it did so with precisely the instruments the Mexica lacked.

It exported a doctrine, systematically and at enormous expense, through friars sent into the provinces. It built schools. It reduced Nahuatl to an alphabet and taught it, along with Spanish and Latin, so effectively that the largest body of indigenous-language documentation anywhere in the Americas is colonial Nahuatl. And it invented a membership category — *indio*, Christian, vassal of the Crown — which was subordinate and degrading and also, crucially, *a status*: something a Mixtec or a Totonac or a Chalca could hold, with standing in a court he could actually enter.

Within two generations Nahua nobles were writing in alphabetic Nahuatl, styling themselves *don*, litigating in Spanish courts, and — as Module 9 recorded — using their own pre-conquest legal material to do it. Chimalpahin, whose flat sentence about who died in the wars gave Module 3 its hardest evidence, was a Christian Nahua of Chalco

writing in the early seventeenth century, in a tradition that had never stopped being local and was by then entirely inside the new order. The Spanish colonial authorities went on appointing *tlatoque* of Tenochtitlan for decades and of Texcoco until 1564, and provincial dynasties in Oaxaca and elsewhere continued as *caciques* into the seventeenth century and beyond.

One thing must be said about the relation between the two halves of this module, and said carefully, because the glib version is wrong. The catastrophe did not *cause* the naturalisation in any simple sense; the friars would have gone regardless, and the conversion had its own dynamics. But it is not possible to separate them entirely either. An order that loses eighty per cent of its people in three years loses the men who knew the rituals, the elders who held the annals, the priesthoods, the schools, and the demographic weight to sustain a local world against a new one — and the new categories become the only ones on offer partly because the old ones have been emptied. The forgetting and the dying happened in the same fifty years and to the same people.

Reading the accounting against the framework

Three findings.

The first is the contribution: the metabolic note is called not by the violence of a conquest but by the removal of the coordination, and the size of the payment is set by how far the coordination had lifted the population above the land's natural capacity — not by how violent the conquest was. The sword column for this case, added at its most generous, sits in the hundreds of thousands across ninety-five years. The metabolic column sits in the millions to tens of millions across sixty. The ratio is on the order of a hundred to one, and the larger figure was produced by an *absence* — no granaries, no dike maintenance, no redistribution, no local authority to organise a response — meeting a drought that would have come anyway. A study should therefore date a conquest's true cost not from its battles but from the moment its predecessor's coordinating institutions stopped functioning, and should size the expected bill by asking how much engineering the previous order had been doing.

The second is that intensive coordination is a debt instrument, and the more successful an order is, the larger the note its successor's failure will call. The Mexica did not impoverish the Basin; they engineered it, and Module 5 found provincial commoners with imported pottery, obsidian and Tarascan bronze in their houses. That success is precisely what made the collapse catastrophic. An order that lifts two million people onto a floor of chinampas, dikes and redistribution has, by that achievement, written a claim against the future which will be presented in full to

whoever is standing there when the machine stops. This is not an argument against building the machine. It is an argument for reading every impressive pre-modern demographic peak as a liability as well as an accomplishment.

The third closes the study's central thread. The framework asks whether enough time passed for the violence to be forgotten, and this case answers by showing both outcomes side by side within a single century. The Mexica order did not naturalise, and every module of this study has identified a reason: no formation, no membership, no exported doctrine, no individual assessment, no entanglement, no coordination beyond a marriage. The Spanish order did naturalise, fast, using each of those instruments in turn. **The difference between an order that becomes the furniture of reality and one that remains visibly an armed group in occupation is not time. It is whether the order ever built anything designed to reach the people it ruled** — and the Mexica, having correctly calculated at every step that they did not need to, were still, on the day they fell, exactly what they had been on the day they started.

One discipline in closing, and it is the one this module needs most. Nothing here is an argument that the conquest was a lesser evil because the Mexica had also killed people, and nothing here is an argument that the Mexica order was benign because the catastrophe that followed it was larger. The two columns are separate and both are appalling. What the accounting shows is something more disquieting than a comparison: that the largest killer in this story was not an army, or a temple, or a doctrine, but the interval in which nobody was maintaining the dike. Ninety-three years of an order that ran on terror, tribute and the blood of captives killed fewer people than sixty years of the coordination being gone. That is not a defence of the order. It is a statement about how much of a dense civilisation's population is held up by administration nobody notices — and about who pays, and how fast, when the administration stops.

A note on sources. Every figure in this module is a range and the ranges are wide, because the underlying disputes are real and unresolved. The sixteenth-century population of central Mexico is the largest of them: the Berkeley school of Woodrow Borah and Sherburne Cook argued for figures around twenty-five million at contact, later scholars including William Sanders and Ángel Rosenblat for figures several times lower, and the debate is not settled. This module therefore reports mortality as the epidemiological literature reports it, in ranges, and draws its conclusions from ratios and orders of magnitude rather than from absolute numbers.

Casualty figures for the Mexica wars are as the chronicles give them and are discussed in Module 1. The sacrifice figures and the archaeology of the Huei Tzompantli are discussed in Module 3. Figures for the siege of 1521 are discussed in

Module 10. The famine of 1450–54, the prices reported for people sold into bondage, and the tree-ring confirmation of that drought are discussed in Module 5.

The epidemic figures — five to eight million for the smallpox of 1519–20, five to fifteen million for the cocoliztli of 1545–48, two to two and a half million for that of 1576–78 — are from Rodolfo Acuña-Soto, David W. Stahle, Malcolm K. Cleaveland and Matthew D. Therrell, *Megadrought and Megadeath in 16th Century Mexico* (*Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 2002) and their subsequent paper on the 1576 epidemic (*FEMS Microbiology Letters*, 2004), which rest in turn on the demographic estimates of Cook and Simpson; the identification of cocoliztli as an indigenous rodent-borne haemorrhagic fever amplified by drought is their hypothesis and remains debated, with a 2018 ancient-DNA study proposing *Salmonella enterica* Paratyphi C as the agent at one Mixtec site. The tree-ring reconstruction of the sixteenth-century megadrought is Stahle's and his collaborators'. What this module relies on is not the identity of the pathogen but the demonstrated coincidence of the epidemics with extreme drought and with the destruction of the region's food-security institutions, which no party to the debate disputes.

The construction of the *albarradón* under Motecuhzoma I and Nezahualcóyotl after the flood of 1449, its extension under Ahuitzotl, its destruction in the siege of 1521 and the fact that it was not rebuilt, the floods of 1555–56, 1604, 1607 and 1629, the five years of inundation after 1629, and the *Desagüe* begun in 1607 under Viceroy Luis de Velasco and directed by Enrico Martínez are as the standard accounts give them; Charles Gibson's assessment of the *Desagüe*'s scale is his, in *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule*. The labour figures for the *Desagüe* vary between sources.

The Valle del Mezquital material — the pre-conquest agricultural landscape, the ungulate irruption, the desiccation and erosion, and the roughly ninety per cent demographic decline between 1521 and 1600 — is Elinor G. K. Melville's, in *A Plague of Sheep: Environmental Consequences of the Conquest of Mexico*, whose thesis has been criticised on the grounds that it generalises from one valley and engages selectively with the wider demographic literature; it is used here for the mechanism it demonstrates rather than as a description of New Spain as a whole. The continuity of indigenous dynasties under Spanish rule, the colonial appointment of *tlatoque* at Tenochtitlan and Tetzcoco, and the scale of colonial Nahuatl documentation follow James Lockhart and the New Philology.

TWO CITIES THAT COULD NOT SEE EACH OTHER

Module 12 · Convergence and Divergence — a comparative essay setting the Triple Alliance beside the Roman Republic, chosen because the two orders shared no menu, no contact and no common ancestor, so that whatever they did alike they arrived at separately; showing that their characteristic move was identical and their outcomes opposite, and that the variable which separated them was physical; and ending on the strongest case against this study's whole method, which is that we can only read the orders that lasted

This collection was built European-colonial, and its recurring claim has been that the dynamics it describes are not European and not colonial. A claim like that can be asserted indefinitely and demonstrated only once, and the demonstration requires a particular kind of case.

The difficulty is that the collection's European cases share a menu. The men who governed Algeria, Vietnam, Buganda, Iraq, Rhodesia and Senegal read each other's despatches, sat in each other's institutes, copied each other's residency systems and native-policy manuals, and were educated in an intellectual tradition that had Rome permanently in view — Lyautey and Lugard alike reached for Roman analogies without being asked. When those orders converge on an instrument, one cannot easily tell whether the convergence reflects a position with few good answers or simply a profession with a shared library. The companion paper to this series makes the point in its own terms: what looks from a distance like an idea diffusing under its own power is, up close, particular people looking at what has worked elsewhere and judging it would serve them. Where the field of the visible is shared, convergence is cheap evidence.

The Triple Alliance is outside the menu entirely. There was no contact. No Mexica ruler had heard of Rome, no Roman of Tenochtitlan; there was no intermediary, no shared ancestor institution, no trade route, no translated text, no traveller. The two orders were separated by an ocean and about seventeen centuries, and every material condition differed: Rome had the wheel, draught animals, iron, an alphabet and coinage, and the Mexica had none of the five.

That makes the comparison the collection's control condition. Anything the two orders did alike, they arrived at separately, from the position, with the materials each had. And anything they did differently is not a failure of one to reach the other's

standard — that habit of scoring the past by its distance from a model is exactly what this series refuses — but information about what was actually available.

The Roman study was built on the same framework by the same method, and its author states its central finding in a single sentence: the Republic's characteristic move was to decline to build the instrument, and let the gap be filled by something already present. This essay's argument is that the Mexica made the identical move, for the identical reason, and that everything which followed was decided by *who was standing there to fill the gap* — which was decided, in the end, by whether a man could carry more than twenty-three kilograms.

The same founding, twice

Begin where both studies begin, and the convergence is immediate and slightly eerie.

Rome's Republic, on its own tradition, was not a revolution against the monarchy's apparatus but a takeover of it by the men who had served the kings. They razed nothing. The tyrant's temple was consecrated and used. The king's house was kept. A priest was retained to perform the sacrifices the king had performed, under a title that still named him king. The calendar stayed. One feature was altered: the tenure and singularity of command. Everything else remained in working order, because everything else was working.

Tenochtitlan in 1428 did the same thing to Azcapotzalco. The Mexica had spent fifty years as Tepanec auxiliaries, learning the machine from inside; when Tezozomoc's succession broke, they took the seat and left the apparatus standing. The tribute schedules stayed. The practice of leaving a beaten town its dynasty and billing it stayed. The placement of kinsmen on subordinate thrones stayed. Tlacopan — a Tepanec town under a Tepanec lineage — was made a full partner, which is to say the old order continued under new ownership. What changed at Azcapotzalco was the tenancy.

Both orders then bought a warrant from an issuer who could not be cross-examined. Rome's supreme authority was the *mos maiorum*, unwritten ancestral precedent, interpretable by every member of the governing class and located entirely in a past that could not answer back; Claudius, cataloguing the Republic's instruments on a bronze tablet, used the same word for each of them — *repertum*, hit upon. Tenochtitlan's warrant was descent from Tula, a state two and a half centuries in ruins whose name had by then decayed into the ordinary word for a craftsman, bought by a marriage in 1376 from a city that could not audit the claim because its own descent was equally a claim.

And both then destroyed or lost the early record and reconstructed it. Livy opens his sixth book by explaining that the records perished when the Gauls burned the city.

Itzcoatl's council burned the histories on purpose, and the Florentine Codex preserves the reason they gave — that it was not necessary for the people who are carried to know the black ink and the red.

Three convergences before either study reaches its first module: an internal capture that razes nothing, a warrant taken from a dead issuer, and a founding archive that does not survive. None of them can be diffusion. All three are what a man in that position does with what is lying about.

A floor made of the governed, pointed outward

Module 1 of each study describes, in different vocabulary, the same institution.

Rome's floor was a militia of propertied citizens who bought their own weapons, served under men they had elected for a single year, and went home at harvest. Tenochtitlan's was the adult male commoner population of the allied cities, called out through the wards, trained in the ward school, and sent home after the campaign. Neither state maintained a standing force. In both, the floor of force and the governed population were the same men, and in both the floor pointed outward — at other polities, not down at a subject population.

Both also produced, from that arrangement, a promotion ladder that had to be climbed by going out again: Roman *virtus* and the spoils and the ladder of offices; the Mexica count of captives, denominated by the quality of the enemy, with insignia burned at a man's death so that his sons had to earn their own.

The divergence is in what happened next, and it is instructive. Rome's citizen militia gradually became a professional army recruited from the propertyless and paid by its commanders, and that transformation is the proximate mechanism of the Republic's destruction. The Mexica never professionalised. Not because they declined to; because they could not. An army that draws pay requires a fiscal instrument capable of paying it, and the Triple Alliance had no coinage, no treasury in the Roman sense, and a revenue collected in cloth and delivered twice a year. The Roman failure mode was structurally unavailable in Mesoamerica — which is the first appearance of this essay's theme, that several of the differences between the two orders are not choices at all.

The instrument neither of them built

Now the central convergence, and it is large enough to require its own inventory.

The Roman study's list of omissions: no written constitution; no mechanism to compel a magistrate; no division of the bulk of the conquered public land; no schools; no revenue service; no audit of governors; no court established to defend a liberty. Each

gap was filled by something already present — precedent by the governing class's own interpretation, magisterial restraint by the man's expectation of forty years among his peers, the public land by whoever had the herds to occupy it, the formation of the elite by private households, the collection of taxes by licensed contractors, the spoils by the discretion of whoever took them.

The Mexica list: no garrisons; no resident administration; no statute settling the founding division; no schools for subjects; no membership category; no individual assessment; no audit of any kind; no censorship outside the capital. Each gap was filled by something already present — enforcement by the memory of a visit and the broadcast of a spectacle, the settlement by a remembered bargain, the collection by the local dynasty and the ward, belief by the subject's own gods left standing, intelligence by merchants who were travelling anyway.

Two orders, no contact, and the same characteristic move: **decline to build, and let what is already there do the work.** In both cases the reason is identical and is visible in the record of both: the omission was cheap on the day it was made. A garrison costs food and men every year; a spectacular reprisal costs one campaign and is remembered for twenty. A revenue service costs salaries; a licensed collector costs nothing and pays in advance. A survey of conquered land costs surveyors; leaving it open costs nothing at all.

And in both cases the omission had the same long property, which the Roman study states and this one confirms: **the party who fills a gap accumulates a position which cannot afterwards be revoked, because there was never an instrument to revoke.** Rome discovered this when it tried to recover the public land and found there was nothing to cancel; the recovery had to be attempted by legislation against men in possession, and the attempt killed the Gracchi and, eventually, the Republic. Tenochtitlan discovered it when its subject rulers, each of whom had been left holding everything he had held before, changed sides in a season.

And who was standing there to fill it

Here the two orders diverge completely, and the divergence is the most useful thing this comparison produces.

In Rome the gaps were filled by Romans. The unsurveyed public land was occupied by Roman senators with herds and clients. The formation of the governing class ran through Roman households, patron to client, father to son. The right to collect the taxes of Asia was auctioned to Roman *publicani*, who became a political estate in their own right. The spoils of a province went to the Roman magistrate who took them. Every omission accrued a position, and every accumulated position

belonged to a member of the Roman elite. Those accumulations became, over a century, the oligarchy that ate the Republic — an internal failure, executed by men who were fully inside the settlement.

In Tenochtitlan the gaps were filled by the conquered. The absent garrison left the beaten town's own warriors in place. The absent assessment left the collection to the local lord. The absent doctrine left the local gods in their temples. The absent membership left every subject exactly what he had been. Every omission accrued a position, and every accumulated position belonged to somebody outside the Mexica settlement — most of all to the sixty-odd dynastic rulers whom Module 2's audit found to be, uniquely in the whole hierarchy, better off if the arrangement ended.

Same move; opposite beneficiary. And the variable that decides which is not culture, character or intelligence. It is transport.

Rome expanded contiguously into a peninsula its own citizens could walk to, settle on and hold. Its instrument for that was the colony: a garrison, a market, a road-head and a land grant at once, planted where the state wanted a permanent Roman presence in somebody else's country, and reachable by roads carrying wheeled vehicles drawn by animals. When Rome declined to build an instrument, there were Romans on the spot to fill the gap, because Rome could put Romans on the spot and keep them there.

The Triple Alliance could not. In a country with no draught animals and no wheeled transport, a porter carried about twenty-three kilograms and a column ate its own supply within days; the empire's armies moved by being fed from tributary towns along the route, which meant conquest could extend the accounts by roughly one campaign's reach at a time and no further. Mexica colonists were planted — nine hundred married men and their families in Oaxaca, two thousand on the Tarascan frontier — and the list is short precisely because the operation was so expensive. There was no possibility of a Mexica citizen population settled across the Gulf coast and the Mixteca. So when Tenochtitlan declined to build an instrument, the only people available to fill the gap were the people it had just conquered.

That is what the companion paper means by the copy being bent by the materials at hand, applied to a case where nothing was copied at all. The bending here is pure position, and the material doing the bending is the absence of an animal that pulls.

Formation, and the variable that actually mattered

The two studies produce, on formation, the sharpest paired result in the collection, and it is the one that neither case could have yielded alone.

Rome had **no schools**. It had no state education of any kind, no doctrine, no examination; its rulers were formed in private houses and its subjects on a patron's

doorstep. When two censors did move against schools in 92 BC, it was to publish an edict *against* teachers of public speaking in Latin. What Rome had instead was *civitas* — a status. A slave could be freed into the citizen body. A defeated Latin town could be absorbed outright, or given citizenship without the vote, or bound as an ally on terms graded by its conduct. Philip V of Macedon, at war with Rome, wrote to a Greek city holding Rome up as the model of how to grow a citizen body, and got one detail wrong in exactly the way an admiring foreigner would.

Tenochtitlan had **the most complete formation apparatus of the pre-modern world**: a school in every ward for every boy, a curriculum beginning at the cutting of the umbilical cord, girls trained from three, rations and punishments drawn year by year in a state document, doctrine delivered through the midwife, the festival, the song house and the vocabulary itself. And it had no status of any kind for anyone who was not born Mexica. No office a Huaxtec could hold, no oath he could swear, no rung on the ladder for him, nothing to be admitted to.

The outcomes track the membership axis and ignore the schooling axis completely. Rome absorbed Italy without opening a single school. Tenochtitlan formed its own children from the first minute of life and absorbed nobody at all. **Formation is downstream of membership, not the reverse.** An order with a category and no schools naturalises its conquests; an order with schools and no category does not.

But the Roman study forbids the comfortable version of this, and its own finding is sharper than mine. Rome's citizenship was extended through *household* relations — manumission, patronage, the individual absorbed through somebody's front door — and the Roman study draws the consequence: a household-based order can absorb individuals indefinitely and cannot absorb a people, because a people has no patron. Repeated proposals to extend the citizenship to the Italian allies failed in 125, under Gaius Gracchus, and in 91, when Livius Drusus was assassinated for proposing it. The allies then stopped asking, and the Social War that followed cost something on the order of a hundred thousand dead on the usual estimates, and ended with Rome granting the citizenship it had spent thirty-five years refusing, to communities that had fought it to a standstill.

So the honest comparison is not between a generous Rome and a closed Tenochtitlan. It is this: **Rome possessed a category it refused to extend until it was forced, and Tenochtitlan possessed no category to extend even if it had wanted to.** That distinction is the one that matters, and it connects directly to this series' own account of how orders change. Widening happens when a cornered elite finds it cheaper to deal people in than to keep them out; the threat from below is the weight on a lever worked from above. **But the lever only exists if there is something in the**

drawer to concede. Rome, cornered in 89 BC, had citizenship to hand over, and handed it over, and survived as an order for five more centuries. Tenochtitlan, cornered in 1519, had nothing whatever to offer a Totonac lord except a reduction in his tribute assessment — and a reduction can be revoked, which is precisely why, on the framework's own analysis of credible commitment, it could not have bought anything.

That is this essay's first contribution: **an order with no membership category is not merely slow to naturalise its conquests; it is structurally incapable of being deprived into widening.** The mechanism of Elite Chaos has a precondition, and the precondition is a concession that cannot be taken back.

The default, and the two men who broke it identically

The second contribution comes from the two orders' arrangements for holding an elite together, which are different in every particular and identical in mechanism.

Rome's product was renewable turns: several dozen annual offices coming onto the market every twelve months, all vacated at year's end, a fixed ladder with minimum ages and intervals, and no mechanism whatever for compelling a magistrate to behave — nothing but his expectation of forty years in the Senate among the men he would have to live with. The Roman study's refinement is that a durable default distributes renewable chances rather than fixed shares, so its health is measured by the cost of losing.

Tenochtitlan's product was the same thing built differently. The ruler was elected by a council of four generals, each with a veto. The highest military command was the antechamber to the throne, so that the man most capable of a coup already had the throne on a timetable by legitimate means. Succession ran laterally among tested adults, producing no child ruler and no regency in a century. And the rival royal line was given a hereditary parallel office that existed only so long as the arrangement did.

Now the two failures, and they are the same failure.

Sulla, having won a civil war, wrote into his statute a clause barring the descendants of the proscribed from office. That made defeat *heritable* — and inverted the whole calculation, because a man for whom losing meant his sons' permanent exclusion cannot afford to lose, and a man who cannot afford to lose will not accept a result.

Moctezuma II, in 1502, barred commoners from service in the royal palaces and from high office, closing the one channel by which a Mexica commoner could acquire a stake. In 1516 he overrode the Texcocan electoral council to install his own nephew over six legitimate brothers, converting a legitimate succession into an imposition and turning a disappointed heir into a counter-elite with an army. He narrowed the

coalition twice, in the two directions available to him, and did it in the last seventeen years of the order's life.

Two men, no possible knowledge of each other, seventeen centuries apart, in states with nothing physical in common — and both destroyed a functioning default by the same move: **converting a renewable chance into a permanent exclusion.** Both orders fell within a generation of it. That is not a shared library. It is a position with a small number of moves, one of which is fatal and looks, from inside, like consolidation.

Liberty: the same source, different reach

Both studies find liberties in the same place and neither finds them where they are conventionally sought.

The Roman finding is that every protection traces to a faction that needed it — that the liberties an order possesses map onto what its second tier needed to win its fight with the first, and that they fail when their enforcers stop acting rather than when they are repealed. Rome had strong protection of the body and none whatever of the voice.

The Mexica finding is identical in structure. Nezahualcóyotl's celebrated code came from a returned exile facing disloyal relatives and uncertain subordinates, who standardised the law and deliberately reduced his own judges' discretion — because a judge with discretion is a patronage machine for a rival. And the one group below the nobility that won real legal autonomy, the *pochteca*, won it at the moment their city's political standing was destroyed, by selling the state the one thing it could not produce for itself.

The divergence is in reach, and it returns to the same variable a third time. The Roman plebs won the tribunate and *provocatio* — general, institutional, invocable by anyone inside the citizen body. The Mexica merchants won courts, law codes and privileges that applied to merchants, were held internally, and had to be physically concealed: caravans leaving after dark, wealth shown only indoors, Ahuitzotl's gold and amber lip-plugs worn on feast days lest the hereditary lords take offence. The Roman plebs were already inside a membership category, so what they won extended to everyone inside it. The Mexica merchants were inside a guild, so what they won extended to the guild and died with it.

To which both studies add a compatible mechanism for durability. Rome's: a liberty fails when its enforcers stop acting. Tenochtitlan's: a concession lasts as long as the conceding power cannot internalise the function it is attached to — which is why the merchants kept their courts and the ennobled soldiers lost their offices in 1502 without a fight, since a noble could do a soldier's job and could not walk to Guatemala in disguise.

Change, confirmed twice from opposite ends

On the question of where structural change comes from, the two cases between them make about as strong a pair as the record allows, because they fail in opposite directions and reach the same place.

Rome supplies the case of a rising that *won battles* and changed nothing: slave armies that beat consular armies, and an order that absorbed the shock and continued. Tenochtitlan supplies the complement — an empire in which, across ninety-three years, not one commoner rising is recorded at all, under provocations that ought to have produced several. Every rebellion in the Mexica record was led by a man with a throne, and the rebellions clustered at successions in Tenochtitlan rather than at moments of maximum suffering, because they were timed by elite calculation and not by grievance.

And both orders fell to elite mechanisms. Rome's was exhaustion running backwards — destroyed by the wars it won, its conquests generating the armies, the provinces and the fortunes that its constitution had no instrument to absorb. Tenochtitlan's was fracture at the second capital, compounded by an outsider who solved a coordination problem: sixty subject rulers each of whom would gain by defection and none of whom could afford to move first, until a body arrived that could absorb the cost of being first and be seen to survive it. Five arrested tax collectors at Cempoala, and no army came.

The two failures share a structure worth naming. Rome's settlement of 338 BC dissolved the Latin league and replaced one collective treaty with a set of bilateral arrangements graded by each community's conduct — an atomisation of subordinates that prevented horizontal coordination. The Mexica inherited exactly that from the Tepanecs and never varied it: each *altepetl* assessed separately, no horizontal ties, no forum in which subjects met. **Both orders atomised their subordinates to prevent them from combining, and both were brought to crisis when the atomisation failed** — Rome in 91 BC when the allies stopped asking and combined, Tenochtitlan in 1519 when a stranger supplied the meeting point. Rome survived because it had citizenship in the drawer. Tenochtitlan did not, because it had nothing.

The accounting, and something close to a controlled comparison

Module 11 of this study argued that a metabolic note is called not by a conquest's violence but by the removal of the coordination the conquest destroys, and that the size of the payment is set by how far that coordination had lifted the population above the land's natural capacity.

The two cases test it against each other almost cleanly, because they differ on exactly that variable.

Rome's Republic ended and its administration did not. The Roman study's finding is that an apex change repricing no stratum beneath it is the cheapest structural change available and therefore the one that succeeds — and the Principate repriced nobody: the roads stayed, the law stayed, the grain fleets stayed, the municipal structures stayed, the citizenship kept expanding. There was no metabolic call, because there was no interruption to call it.

Tenochtitlan's order ended and its administration went with it. The dikes were destroyed in the siege of 1521 and never rebuilt; the granaries, the chinampa maintenance, the redistribution network and the local authority structures that organised a response to drought all stopped. When the sixteenth-century megadrought arrived — a drought comparable to the one that had produced the famine of 1454, which a functioning state had met by opening its stores — the mortality ran to eighty per cent. The sword column across ninety-five years sits in the hundreds of thousands. The metabolic column across sixty years sits in the millions to tens of millions.

Two orders, both ending; one kept its administration and paid nothing extra, the other lost it and paid a hundred to one. That is not proof, and the confounds are enormous — an ocean of them, beginning with the fact that one succession was internal and the other brought new pathogens. But it is the closest thing to a controlled comparison this material offers, and the mechanism it isolates is the right one.

The strongest case against all of this

Now the objection, and it must be put at full strength rather than in a convenient form, because a study that ends by congratulating its own method has wasted the reader's time.

The pool is skewed, and everything above may be an artefact of the skew. We can only run studies on orders that lasted long enough to leave records. Orders that made bad moves failed in a generation and left nothing to read. So the corpus is not a sample of what rulers do; it is a sample of what *worked*, filtered by survival. And on that reading, the convergence between Rome and Tenochtitlan proves nothing about the shape of the option set. It merely reports the filter. Of course two surviving orders look alike: the ones that did otherwise are not available for comparison.

The objection has a second edge that is sharper still. Both orders lost or destroyed their founding records and reconstructed them afterwards — Livy's Gauls, Itzcoatl's fire. So what survives is, in both cases, a durable order's retrospective account of how it came to be right. Position-logic reads that account and finds that each move was the

obvious one from the position. But it would find that whatever the record said, because the analyst chooses which features of a situation constitute "the position," and the temptation is to choose the features that make the move look inevitable. On that objection, position-logic is not a finding about history. It is a way of narrating any outcome as necessary after the fact, and therefore unfalsifiable, and therefore not doing the work it claims.

That has to be conceded in part, and the parts have to be separated.

The skew is real and is not fixable, and the framework should say what it describes. It describes durable orders. It has almost nothing to say about the ones that failed in a generation, and it should stop claiming, when it claims it, to describe rule as such.

But the within-sample variation defeats the strong form of the objection. Rome and Tenochtitlan are both inside the filter — both lasted, both left records. If survival were doing the explanatory work, they should resemble each other on the variables the framework identifies as decisive. They do not. On the single variable this essay finds most consequential, they are opposites: Rome had an expandable membership category and no schools; Tenochtitlan had total schooling and no category. And the outcomes track the variable rather than the filter. Rome absorbed a peninsula and its order outlived its constitution by centuries; Tenochtitlan absorbed nobody and its periphery defected in a season. Survivorship explains neither contrast, because both cases survived.

And the framework's characteristic findings are about failure, not success, which is the opposite of what survivorship bias produces. A corpus filtered for success generates a theory of why the winners were right. Both these studies generate the same theory of why the winners were destroyed — that an order's characteristic failure is usually its characteristic strength arriving later. Rome's omissions made its expansion cheap and accrued the positions that ended it. Tenochtitlan's omissions made its empire cheap and accrued the positions that ended it. Nobody's self-flattering reconstruction produces that.

And at least one prediction in this study could have failed and did not. Module 4 concluded, from the formation evidence alone and before the collapse was researched, that the formed core would fight to destruction and the unformed periphery would change sides in weeks. Both halves held: the periphery went between the summer of 1519 and the spring of 1521, and Tenochtitlan elected three rulers under plague and siege and fought street by street to the last quarter. That is not proof. It is evidence that the mechanism does some work beyond narration.

Then the concession that must not be dodged, and it is the one the objection is right about. If position-logic is true, convergence is *predicted* — and observing a predicted thing confirms very little. The convergences catalogued in this essay do not demonstrate the framework; they demonstrate that the framework is describing the shape of an option set, which is what it says it is doing, and the argument is closer to circular than its rhetoric admits. What would actually test it is the opposite finding: an order in a comparable position that took a wholly different move and prospered. This collection has not been organised to hunt for that, and it should be. Until it is, the honest status of these convergences is that they are consistent with position-logic and would also be consistent with a good deal else.

And the deepest version of the objection stands unanswered. "The position" is described by an analyst who already knows what the man did. The only discipline against that is to state a position's constraints before looking at the move, and this study did that a few times and not most of the time. That is a real weakness and it is not repaired by noticing it.

And the counter-position on the Mexica themselves

One more case has to be put, and it is the one a reader who knows this material best will make.

You have read ninety-three years as a sequence of cost-minimising decisions by men in positions, and concluded that the order failed because it never built the instruments that would have made it cheap. But these men were not attempting to build a durable empire and had no such category. They were maintaining the sun. The debt was real to them; the wars produced the payment; the payment kept the world running. To call the coacalco *a hostage-taking rather than the housing of gods, the flower wars a failed strategy rather than a sacred obligation, and Itzcoatl's fire archive management rather than the correction of falsehood, is to substitute your categories for theirs and then score them for failing at something they never attempted. And by their own measure they succeeded. The sun rose every day of their empire. The men who fought to the last stone in 1521 did so because the thing was true.*

Three answers, and the third is a concession.

The first is that this study has not claimed the actors were cynics and has repeatedly found the opposite. The robe passed the constraint test: a coronation was invalid without captives, nobles were punished more severely than commoners, and a ruler who lost a campaign could lose his life. Position-logic does not require insincerity. It claims that the reasons available to a man are the reasons his position makes available —

which is an account of where categories come from, not a substitution of one set for another.

The second is that "they were not trying to build a durable empire" is this study's finding rather than an objection to it. They were not building for durability, which is exactly why they did not build the instruments of it, and the consequences followed without anybody intending them. That is the whole shape of the argument.

The third has to be granted without qualification. **By their own measure they succeeded, and the measure was not contemptible.** For ninety-three years the sun rose. A city of perhaps two hundred thousand stood on an island in a salt lake and was fed, watered and kept dry by engineering its successors could not replace in three centuries. Courts sat permanently and punished theft from a poor man's field more severely than theft from the palace, and required maize to be planted along the roads so that a traveller need not rob a farmer. Every boy went to school. A commoner could rise by his own courage into the council of a state. A body of law was made in Texcoco good enough that its own subjects were still using it to defend themselves in foreign courtrooms a century after the state that made it had ceased to exist. These are not the achievements of a barbarism, and a reader who has been taught to see only the stone has been taught badly.

What this study adds is only that the measure was theirs and the bill was somebody else's. It was paid by Chalca commoners on the stone while the nobles of both sides were exchanged. It was paid by women weaving, on light spindles, the cloth that was the empire's currency and which their own class was forbidden to wear. It was paid by a father in 1454 selling his daughter for four hundred cobs of maize, before four witnesses, in an orderly market, while the priests concluded that the debt had been underpaid. Legibility is not pardon, and it is also not indictment. It is only the arithmetic, laid out, with the sum left where it belongs.

What the two cases leave the framework

Four things, offered for the card.

An order with no membership category cannot be deprived into widening. The mechanism by which cornered elites deal people in requires a concession that cannot be taken back, and a status is such a concession where a tax reduction is not. Rome had one and refused it for thirty-five years and then, at gunpoint, produced it. Tenochtitlan had nothing in the drawer. Where a study finds an order that never widened under pressure, it should ask whether the order possessed anything it *could* have conceded before concluding that it refused.

A default is destroyed by converting a renewable chance into a permanent exclusion, and the move looks like consolidation from inside. Sulla made defeat heritable; Moctezuma II closed the ladder and imposed a succession. Neither could have known of the other. Both were tidying.

Where an order declines to build an instrument, the decisive question is who is physically present to fill the gap — and that is often settled by transport rather than by policy. Rome's omissions accrued to Romans because Rome could put Romans on the ground and keep them there. Tenochtitlan's accrued to the conquered because a man carrying twenty-three kilograms cannot found a province.

And formation is downstream of membership. An order with a category and no schools naturalises; an order with schools and no category does not. Neither case alone could have shown it.

One last thing, and it is the discipline this series applies to itself. The field of the visible bounds the analyst as it bounds the ruler. This essay was written from inside an order, with its instruments, in its categories, and the position from which the comparison looks obvious is itself a position. The Mexica lords who could not imagine a status a Huaxtec might hold were not stupid; they were standing somewhere that made the question invisible. The reader is standing somewhere too, and so is the writer, and the honest end of a study like this is not a verdict on the dead but the suspicion that the instrument we are not building — the one that will look obvious to whoever reads our record — is invisible from here for exactly the same kind of reason.

A note on sources. This module is comparative and makes no new primary-source claims of its own. Every factual assertion about the Triple Alliance is established, with its sources, in the module of this study that it summarises: the Tepanec inheritance and the Culhua marriage in the Landscape; the composition and logistics of the army, the promotion ladder, the absence of garrisons and the flower-war dispute in Module 1; the settlement of 1428 and the Durán passages in Module 2; the Templo Mayor, the *coacalco* and the Chimalpahin passage in Module 3; the schools, the *huehuetlatolli* and the Codex Mendoza's account of childhood in Module 4; the famine of 1450–54 and the collective assessment in Module 5; the tribute rolls, the *quachtli* and the sumptuary code in Module 6; the *pochteca*, the burning of the histories and the revision of the 1519 narrative in Module 7; the Council of Four, the *cihuacoatl* office and the Texcocan succession crisis in Module 8; the courts, Nezahualcóyotl's code and the merchants' autonomy in Module 9; the allied coalition of 1521 and the Cempoala episode in Module 10; and the epidemics, the dike and the *Desagüe* in Module 11.

Every assertion about Rome is drawn from *The Roman Republic: The Complete Study* in this same collection and belongs to that study rather than to this one: the

takeover of the monarchy's apparatus and the retention of the *rex sacrorum* and the calendar; Claudius's *repertum*; Livy on the loss of the records; the citizen militia and the axe removed at the sacred boundary; the settlement of 338 BC and the bilateral arrangements graded by conduct; the undivided *ager publicus*; the censorial edict of 92 BC against Latin schools of rhetoric; Philip V's letter to Larisa; the failed extensions of the citizenship in 125 and 91 BC and the Social War; the annual magistracies and the ladder of offices; the clause in Sulla's statute making defeat heritable; the *publicani* and the absence of a revenue service; the slave wars that changed nothing; and the Republic's destruction by the wars it won. The dating conventions, source cautions and contested points attaching to each of those are stated in that study's own modules and its front matter, which notes in particular that Rome produced no historian for four centuries after the Republic began and that the conventional early dates are labels rather than calendar positions.

The framework concepts used comparatively here — the floor, the robe, the settlement, the cost column, the default, position-logic, the field of the visible, and the four cracks by which a floor breaks — are the series', set out in *Above Warlordism*, *The Machine That Runs Itself*, *The Architect and the Inheritor*, *Position Logic*, *The Field of the Visible* and *Elite Chaos*, the last of which leans in turn on Skocpol on state breakdown, on Goldstone and Turchin on elite overproduction, and on Acemoglu and Robinson on the franchise as a credible commitment. The survivorship objection stated in this module is the author's own and is answered here rather than deflected; the concession that convergence is weak evidence for a thesis which predicts convergence is made without reservation, and the corresponding research programme — to look for an order in a comparable position that took a wholly different move and prospered — is left open.